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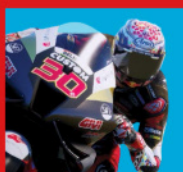
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FUTURE

ISSUE 385

GAMING MONITORS

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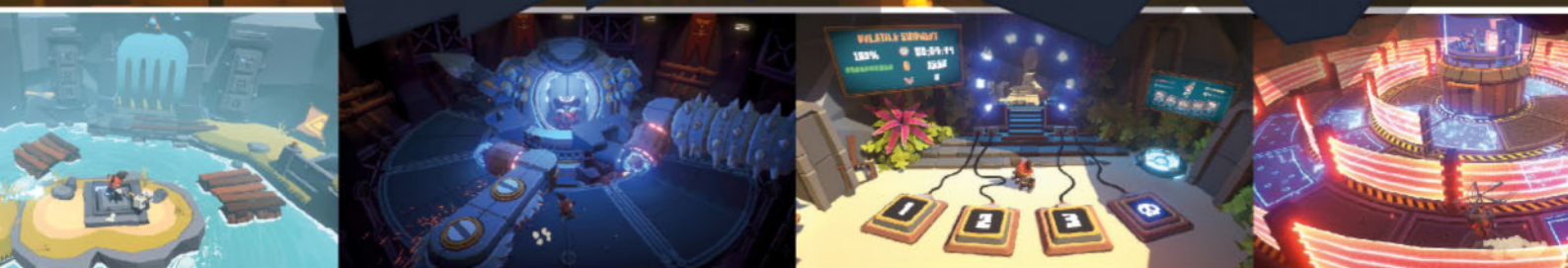
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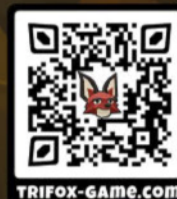
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"BROKEN ROADS CONTINUES THAT EVOLUTION"

**ROBERT JONES**Twitter
@richolasj**This month**

Converted the basement of PC Gamer Towers into a nuclear bunker. After all, when the bombs drop, we're going to need somewhere to hide from the roving bands of mad, irradiated, cannibalistic console gamers.

War. War never changes. But post-nuclear apocalypse RPGs do, as evidenced by PC gaming's rich and storied history with the sub-genre.

From the *STALKER* and *Metro* series of games, to the now iconic *Fallout* titles of Interplay and then, more recently, Bethesda, the gaming experiences of surviving the fallout of nuclear war have evolved massively over the past quarter of a century.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**ROBIN VALENTINE**Twitter
@robinvalentine**This month**

Donned a beret, a long trenchcoat, and a big curly (fake) moustache to join La Résistance.

**WES FENLON**Twitter
@wesleyfenlon**This month**

Shot a T-rex up the arse with a really rather large cannon. Immediately regretted his decision.

**TYLER WILDE**Twitter
@tyler_wilde**This month**

Tried to end the Everwar by, yes, you guessed it, engaging in even more war. Hmm...

**JODY MACGREGOR**Twitter
@jodymacgregor**This month**

Was chased by a family of radplatypuses through post-apocalypse Australia.

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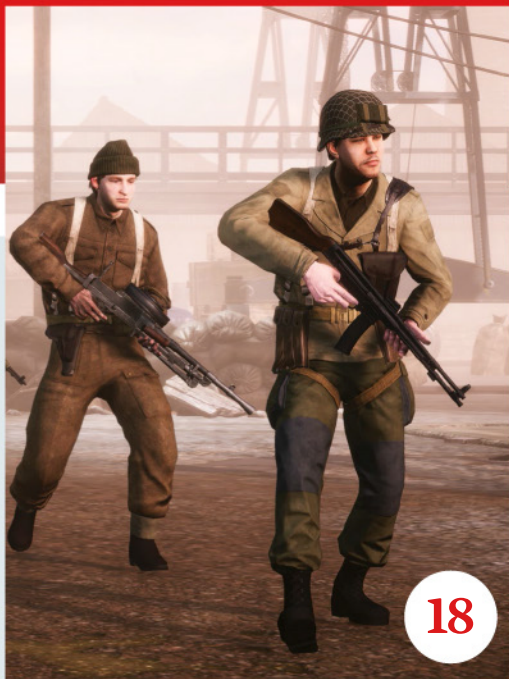
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Fallout was apparently considered a side-project, and Cain and his team sidelined until it became clear this was something.

THE FALLOUT FALLOUT

FALLOUT's co-creator dropping bombs about the nascent days of CRPGs

The co-creator of *Fallout* (and more recently *Outer Worlds*) Tim Cain has recently embarked on a one man mission to spill the beans about the early days of CRPGs. Over various YouTube videos Cain has served up treasures about *Fallout* including that the true purpose of vaults in *Fallout*, it turns out, were basically testbeds for a starship.

"If you ever read reports from the '50s about what scientists thought of full-scale, international, superpower nuclear exchange," said Cain, "there basically is no Earth to come back to".

So the vaults are testing various limits of humanity, with the long-term goal in mind. "Every vault was in some sense a test," said Cain. Funnily enough, it's not too far removed from Mr House's big scheme – building a rocket and getting out of here – in *Fallout: New Vegas*. Cain points out that he has no

**WITH AN OCTOBER
1998 RELEASE FOR
FALLOUT 2, BIG
CRUNCH CAME**

idea what Bethesda's grand vision for the vaults is, so it may have jettisoned the starship idea entirely. But given Bethesda already sent us to space once for some reason – in the *Mothership Zeta* DLC for *Fallout 3* – it wouldn't be incongruous.

Fallout built greater momentum and drew more attention in the months leading to its release, and after its critical success, *Fallout 2* became a priority for Interplay. Cain describes not wanting to make a sequel at the time and increased interference from management, citing the infamous tutorial as an example. "We were mandated to put that in. We were told there had to be

OUR WATCH IS OVER

PLANS SCRAPPED



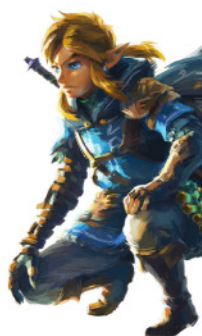
The co-op, PvE story mode that *Overwatch 2* was originally sold on, and that was delayed after not being ready for launch, has now officially been cancelled. It's one more nail in the coffin for a game that's struggled since it was first announced to justify being a sequel at all. ■RV

STEAM LINK

ZELDA HITS PC (KINDA)



Jealous of the Nintendo crowd and all the fun they're having in *Tears of the Kingdom*? Well dry your eyes, because it was only one day after the game hit Switch that the team behind Yuzu – an emulator – announced the game was “full speed on most [PC] hardware” with “no hacks needed”. ■JW

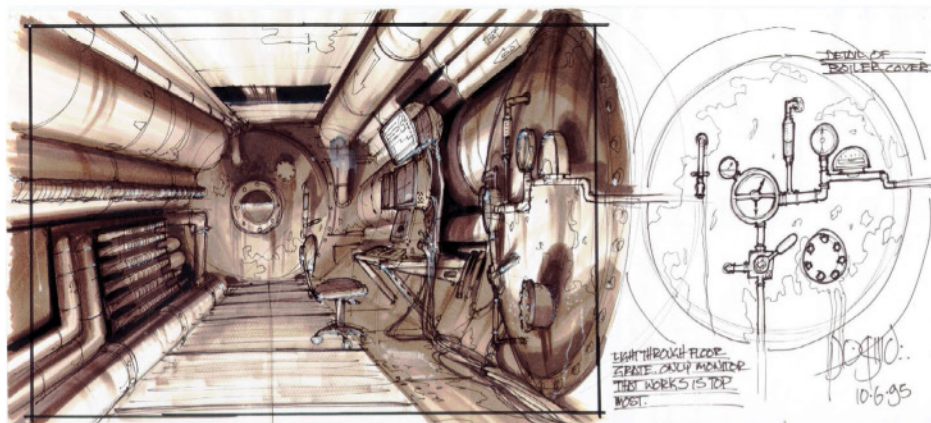


AI GOLD RUSH

NVIDIA LAUGHS



Nvidia expects to make some \$11 billion in the next few months, largely because ChatGPT needs a lot of its GPUs to keep going. This AI boom is fuelling a huge rise in Nvidia's revenue and share price, and even briefly made it one of the few companies with a \$1 trillion value. ■DJ



TOP: The first name for *Fallout* was Vault 13. “It was a bad name,” says Cain. “I said we really need to come up with something better.”

a tutorial. I said, ‘Can people skip it?’ ‘No.’ ‘What about on subsequent playthroughs?’ ‘No.’”

With Interplay wanting an October 1998 release for *Fallout 2*, big crunch came, but Cain didn't even get his bonus for *Fallout*'s over-performance. “I had made an IP from scratch that nobody believed in, except the team,” Cain says, “And then my reward for that was more crunch, more responsibility that I didn't want, tons of interference from people who had ignored us for the last three years, and a reduced bonus to ‘get me motivated’. I was done. If you like *Fallout 2*, play it, enjoy it!”

THROUGH THE FALLOUT

Cain stresses that he does not want viewers to demonise Interplay founder Brian Fargo on the basis of his recollections. “Yes, I think Brian Fargo acted badly sometimes, but he also acted really nicely sometimes”

Cain left the company with Leonard Boyarsky and Jason Anderson shortly thereafter, and the trio would found Troika Games, the ill-fated but supremely productive RPG house, before moving on to other areas of the industry. Cain and Boyarsky would reunite for 2019's *The Outer Worlds*, and Cain continues to contract on games for Obsidian and other developers. ■

Wes Fenlon

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Nicolas Cage

Nicolas Cage will play Nicolas Cage in *Dead by Daylight*.

Honk it

Valorant team Ghost Commandos was forced to forfeit a tournament match because one of them couldn't stop playing *Honkai: Star Rail*.

Deep Thot

Deep Rock Galactic released some cosmetic DLC. Miners wanted more colour, and the dev said, “Yes.”

BioWare Magic

Ex-BioWare dev says no one there believes in “BioWare magic”.

Not LoL

Riot Games has a new CEO as it emerges the company will pay out over \$100 million to 1,548 women to settle a gender discrimination case.

Stale Prince

Will Smith's gonna headline a... mobile game from the makers of *PUBG Mobile*.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Secret identity? Mild peril? A near pathological desire to hide in phone boxes? The Spy isn't suggesting that The Spy is a superhero, but, given that we're decades into the entertainment industry's obsession with all things caped and crusading, surely Hollywood is in need of some fresh ideas. What, is Disney going to make a Planet Terry miniseries? Is Matter Eater Lad about to debut in the DCU? No, so *why not* give The Spy a go?

There are benefits to creating a prestige drama about The Spy. For starters, there's no lore. If you re-read old issues of PC Gamer, there is literally no consistent throughline or connective tissue between any of The Spy's adventures, which means it's impossible for pedantic fans to call you out on any changes you want to make. If one episode's script would be better served by The Spy being a horse, just do it – nobody can definitively tell you that you're wrong. There's also no red tape. Future Publishing probably doesn't even remember that it owns The Spy, so you'd likely get away with just claiming it was your own idea.

And yet despite what The Spy considers to be a reasonable and compelling pitch, for some reason studio heads have been resistant to break from their tried and tested stars. Consider Warner Bros, which is once again making a Superman film – this one meant as a reboot of both the character and the DC cinematic universe itself. In a recent earnings call, Warner Bros Discovery CEO David Zaslav teased that Supes could also find his way back into gaming.

The reason? Naturally it's the absurd success of this year's *Hogwarts Legacy*, which, according to Zaslav, made more than \$1 billion in retail sales. "If you look at *Hogwarts Legacy*," says Zaslav, "a big piece of the success of that game is that you go into it. If you're a player, you go into that game and you're in that world. That's kind of a new concept."

WHAT YOU'RE THINKING

Now, The Spy knows what you're thinking. And look, The Spy needs to warn you right now that this is going to get worse before it gets better. "Before it was gaming and it was storytelling, and now..." Zaslav paused briefly, readying himself to say the thing, "it's very difficult to



understand what the definition of the metaverse is." It's worth remembering the context that this is an earnings call, and that financiers are essentially small, frightened gazelles that roam free on Zoom. You have to slowly, cautiously tempt them in with charts and buzzwords, and avoid using any meaningful definitions or factual statements lest you cause them to panic and dump their hedge funds into crypto.

"It may be in the next couple of years that we launch a Superman movie and... people spend more time and there's more economics of people just hanging out in the Superman world and universe... given the amount of time that people spend on gaming, we don't want to be in the motion picture and longform storytelling business and have somebody else in the business of hanging out in those worlds. Those worlds are going to be quite profitable in the years ahead."

Zaslav's point appears to be that he wants to own not just the movies and games, but also the 'in-betweeners' metaverse space that people will exist in and interact with. Instead of putting Superman in *Fortnite*, just make your own *Fortnite* and persuade people to spend time there. Easy, right?

So, essentially, we're not getting a TV series based on The Spy. It would have been easier to just say that, and it would've been rubbish anyway. Spy out. ■

The Spy

**"IT'S VERY DIFFICULT
TO UNDERSTAND
WHAT THE DEFINITION
OF THE METAVERSE IS"**



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



I'm not sure how Sierra/Dynamix thought 'watch a person sleeping' would go over, but I was still fascinated as a kid.

YOUR DESKTOP PAL

Tracking down **JOHNNY CASTAWAY**, the forefather of virtual pets

My earliest PC gaming memories are haunted by a shipwrecked sailor, stuck on a desert island. For the longest time I couldn't remember who this spectre of my gaming past was. His bedraggled appearance and amusing antics – building sand castles and feuding with a seagull that wanted to sit on his hat – didn't belong to the first level of the original *Duke Nukem* (which I never got past), or any other childhood favourites.

Not *Chopper Commando*, not *Lighthouse: The Dark Being*, and not *Quest for Glory*. This mystery sailor remained shipwrecked in my brain, and after years of ignoring him, I finally dedicated myself to unravelling the mystery on a slow afternoon: his name was Johnny Castaway, and he wasn't actually from a game at all, but instead a screensaver released in 1992 by Sierra On-Line.

A GAME IN SCREENSAVER CLOTHING

Screensavers are nearly forgotten today. Older gamers may fondly remember flying toasters and tangled masses of colourful pipes, but modern displays have no need to prevent burn-in like now-obsolete plasma and CRT monitors. But Johnny Castaway didn't share much in common with the typical '90s screensaver. When it was

released in 1992, Johnny Castaway marketed itself as "the world's first storytelling screensaver" and the description was apt. Stuck on a desert island with a single coconut tree, Johnny was a bearded man in shorts and a sea captain's hat. Every time the screensaver would start, you would get a glimpse into Johnny's ongoing predicament, watching as he climbed his tree for coconuts, tried to start a fire and failed at fighting off a seagull.

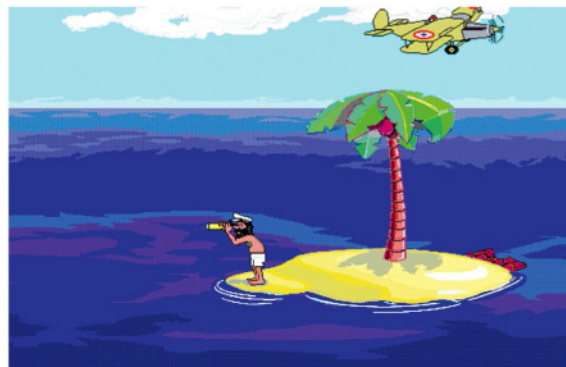
Other screensavers had done something vaguely similar to what Johnny Castaway did, like the 'Mystery' module from the After Dark screensaver collection which showed various 'spooky' scenes at a haunted house. But no other screensaver came close to the narrative and presentation of Johnny Castaway, which blends smaller randomised scenes with larger story segments and a day/night cycle based on the system clock. Johnny's stories were amusing and low stakes – falling in love with a mermaid, trying to build a raft, or sleeping through potential rescues – but they made me want to come back.

While I had no control over what Johnny would do, the way the storytelling was fed to me morphed Johnny Castaway into a game in my young mind. I 'played' it by finding ways to sneak in to catch what Johnny was up to on my dad's state of the art Windows 3.1 laptop. I never knew how many scenes there were or what I'd missed, and that uncertainty sparked my imagination.



Screen savings

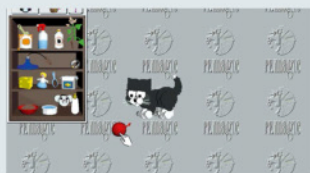
Maybe the strangest thing about the screensaver era is how pricey some of the most popular packs were. After Dark 1.0 for DOS was a hefty \$50 in 1993, though it did include 27 simpler screensavers. Meanwhile, Johnny Castaway and its clever innovations was going for \$35, putting screen savers at roughly the same cost as your average new videogames – back then or now.



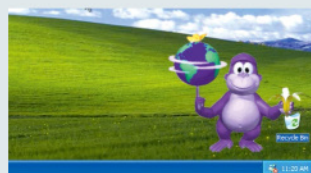
FAR LEFT: Coconuts are both food and foe, frequently knocking poor Johnny out or rolling away.

LEFT: The sheer number of ways Johnny accidentally avoids rescue would seem to prove chaos theory single-handedly.

DESKTOP PET BEGINNINGS *Weird and wonderful examples of early virtual pets on the PC*



CATZ
Released in 1996, playing around with your own virtual cat was a big change from designer Rob Fulp's *Night Trap*.



BONZI BUDDY
Whether it messed up your computer or just annoyed you, purple gorilla Bonzi Buddy invaded countless computers.



CLIPPY OFFICE 97
The Office Assistant in Microsoft Office 97 was much maligned, with users' fury focused on the default avatar: Clippy.



THE SIMS
The natural evolution of desktop pets, *The Sims* exploded in popularity after release in 2000.

Johnny Castaway narrowly predated a whole swath of innovation in digital companions. Virtual (or desktop) pets grew to have proper gameplay and encompass a lot more than a lonely shipwrecked guy, with the *Petz* games releasing in 1995, followed by Tamagotchi becoming a massive fad in 1996 and 1997. The web-based *Neopets* followed. Quasi-spyware Bonzi Buddy, Clippy the Microsoft Office assistant and *The Sims* franchise all have roots in the world of virtual pets. Most of them were far more complex than Sierra's, so why was the simpler Johnny Castaway stuck in my head?

DAILY SHIPWRECKS

After finding my white whale, I discovered that Johnny Castaway was still surprisingly popular. I wanted to install this computing relic again to revisit it, but I figured a 16bit screensaver released in 1992 had about as much chance of running on my modern 64bit installation of Windows 10 as poor Johnny did of escaping his island. But fans have figured out a workaround, and Johnny Castaway has a preconfigured install that launches it inside DOSBox and lets you select it as a screensaver. They rescued Johnny and then dumped him right back on the same island.

Johnny Castaway's producer Jeff Tunnell was asked about the screensaver's longevity in 2022 and posted the Q&A on his website, wherein even he seemed surprised. "I never expected Johnny Castaway to become the underground cult hit that it became," he wrote. "Of course, you always want a product to be successful, and JC was. The only surprise was how long it lasted."

MARKETED ITSELF AS "THE WORLD'S FIRST STORYTELLING SCREENSAVER"

In many ways, Johnny Castaway is a running gag with only one note. He tries to do something – whether fishing or escaping the island – and fails at it. But Johnny Castaway understands the secret to success of a running gag is not in the gag itself, but in the things that support it.

US TV show *Gilligan's Island* revolved around the difficulties in being stranded on a tiny island. For three seasons, the cast would try to escape, and the humour was in the increasingly silly ways their plans would fail and the absurd nature of their existence, right down to the coconut radios. The fact Johnny never escaped was a core feature of his story, just like *Gilligan* and crew.

My glimpses into Johnny's world were always stolen: a few minutes while my dad played dominoes with his friends or while he went to get the mail. Once I showed it to some friends, and we gathered around the laptop screen, basking in the glow of

the 16 standard Windows colours while a weird little digital man angrily stomped on his sandcastle.

Johnny Castaway stuck with me because my mind was forced into creativity: I imagined a whole game, a whole world, around my shipwrecked pal. I must not be the only one, because the pioneering desktop companion is still alive, in that 64bit port of the original screensaver, a disassembled version you can run in your browser, and even his very own *Team Fortress 2* spray. Technology may have moved on, but Johnny's always right where he should be: on his island, trying to woo a mermaid onto shore for dinner. ■

Philip Palmer

Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT

WHAT'S UP HOLMES?

Frogwares founder **WAËL AMR** on designing puzzles for the Sherlock games

Like most people, Waël Amr entered the industry at a young age. Unlike most people, he began with his own company, and never looked back. After a stint in the French army, Amr founded Frogwares at the age of 24. It began with a few people, and today employs around 90.

Initially, Frogwares developed point-and-click adventures, beginning with *Sherlock Holmes: The Mystery of the Mummy*. Three games later, in 2005, it had moved on to its first 3D game: *80 Days*. “The game was a flop market wise,” says Amr, “but it was very ambitious. The idea of going 3D was to modernise the genre. It was taken positively by some, but negatively by others because, you know, there are a lot of people that are looking backwards. Interesting, by the way, to have so many conservative people in modern media.”

For Amr and his team, the move to 3D was a way to try something new while still keeping the core idea of a puzzle-based genre. Players could now explore 3D spaces in addition to solving the puzzles, rather than the more limited movement in what he describes as the previous “2.5D”.

“The main difference is you can use space,” he explains. “You can align things together, you can play with visual illusions, you can play with perception while in 2.5D, there is a tendency to make puzzles that are more cognitive, and the solutions happen in the head of the player, rather than a second to second relationship between the player thinking, and the environment around them.”

Interestingly, in the late 2000s, Frogwares was deliberately making the puzzles in its games (including the original version of *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened*) difficult to solve. The idea was that, rather than have an individual be done with a game in a dozen hours or so across a few days, this approach would encourage a community spirit. Players would communicate and chat with one another in order to solve the puzzles together. Amr describes this as “a dead end” however, not least because he noticed that the market was straying away from the more traditional style of puzzle play. It was at this point that development was steered towards more Sherlock-like

investigation. “We changed entirely what we were doing.”

221B OR NOT 221B

This change was facilitated by team structure. “Since, I think, [*Sherlock Holmes*:] *Crimes & Punishments*, we have a duo of writer and what we call a mission designer, working together to make the gameplay and the story work together. This is how we do it, because we consider the narration to be in service of the gameplay in these games.” With the days of deliberately arduous puzzling behind them, Frogwares now needed to ensure that their puzzles were easier... but not too easy. How do they strike that balance?

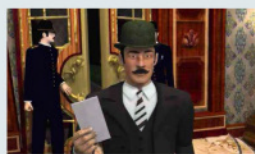
“Playtesting,” says Amr. “It means hearing the feedback of people and interpreting that correctly, because usually people do not tell you what is problematic, exactly. They mean something else, and they need to be understood.” Amr and his team learn largely by what the playtesters do not say. They record the play sessions, and carefully observe the in-game actions, and even the body language, of the playtesters. The difficulty of their games undeniably changed. “It’s been a complaint of our older fans,” says Amr, “that we decreased the difficulty of our games. So I will say in this regard, mission accomplished!”

On release, *Crimes & Punishments* was criticised by some of the fanbase as being far too easy. Today however, those same people “name *Crimes & Punishments* a classic, and they complain that today we are all about the emotions, the looks, the discovery, and not about the crimes”. Proof, as if it were needed, that you can never please all the people all of time. ■

Luke Kemp

FROGWARES: THE BEGINNING

The company's first four games



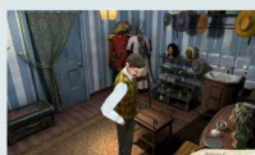
SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE MYSTERY OF THE MUMMY

A first-person point-and-click with pre-rendered backgrounds.



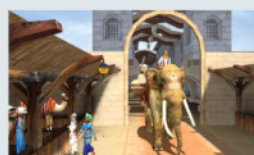
JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH

This 2003 adventure was loosely based on the Jules Verne story.



SH: THE CASE OF THE SILVER EARRING

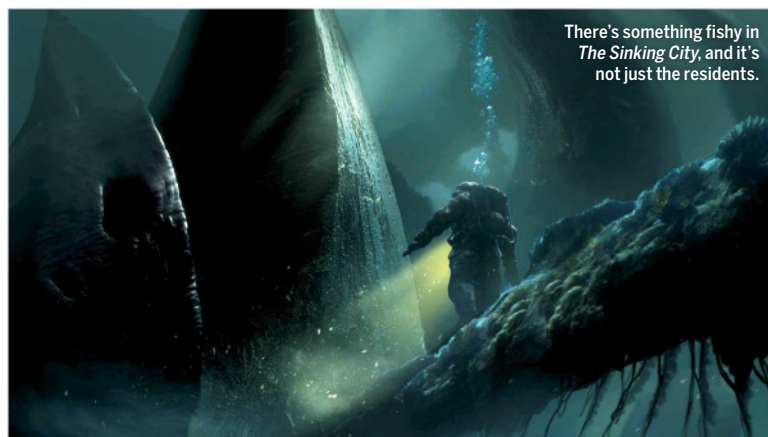
Another year – 2004, to be exact – another point-and-click.



80 DAYS

Frogwares made its first steps into the world of 3D, with another game based on a Jules Verne tale.

**“WE CHANGED
ENTIRELY WHAT WE
WERE DOING”**



There's something fishy in *The Sinking City*, and it's not just the residents.



ABOVE: Frogwares' latest is a remake of 2007's *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened*.



LEFT: *Crimes & Punishments* is widely regarded as one of the best *Sherlock* games.

1 month



EXOPRIMAL

RELEASE July 14, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Capcom

Honestly, what's not to like here? *Exoprimal* promises gameplay where humans armoured in cutting-edge exosuits fight dinosaurs. Roarsome!



ARMORED CORE VI: FIRES OF RUBICON

RELEASE August 24, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** FromSoftware Inc

After an 11-year gap the *Armored Core* series returns, promising even more massive stompy mechs, dazzling new graphics and an epic story set in a dying star system.

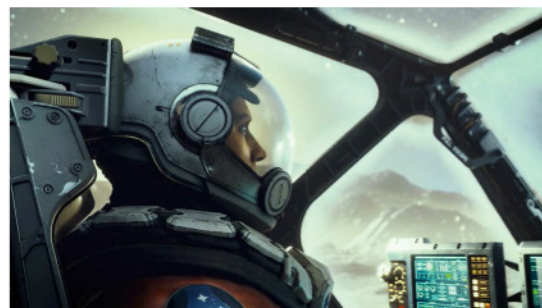


BALDUR'S GATE 3

RELEASE August 31, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Larian Studios

The legendary fantasy RPG returns in the hands of Larian Studios, the talented chaps behind the *Divinity: Original Sin* games. Minsc and Boo confirmed!

3 months



STARFIELD

RELEASE September 6, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios

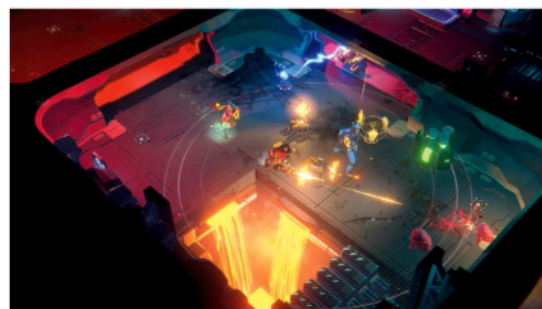
We now have a confirmed release date for *Starfield*, with the open world 'Skyrim in space' RPG dropping in early September. Start planning your character now.



ROBOCOP: ROGUE CITY

RELEASE September, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Teyon

Part man, part machine, all FPS, *RoboCop: Rogue City* tasks you with cleaning up the crime-ridden streets of Old Detroit with guns, lots of guns.



ENDLESS DUNGEON

RELEASE October 19, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Amplitude Studios

A new tactical action game that tasks gamers with recruiting a team of heroes and then have them face off against endless waves of enemies in epic battles.

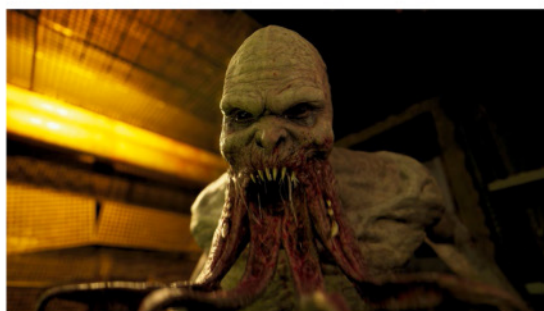
6 months



THE DAY BEFORE

RELEASE November 10, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Fntastic

An open-world zombie apocalypse survival MMO that at one point was the most wished-for game on Steam, *The Day Before* is set to see the light of day in November.



STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

RELEASE December 2023 | **DEVELOPER** GSC Game World

The return to the Exclusion Zone is set for December, although no concrete release date has been announced. Fingers crossed we'll be playing this over Christmas.

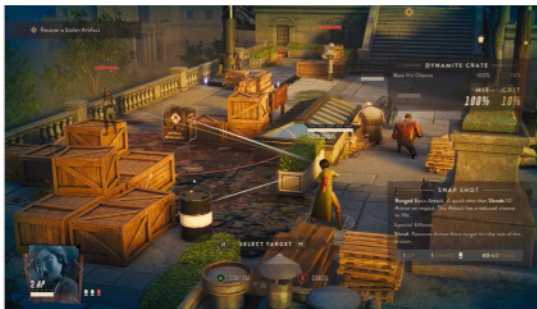


WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive

It's time to grab your chainsword and bolter, and get rending and crushing orks, tyranids and more once again. Action-packed, gore-soaked sequel incoming in 2023.

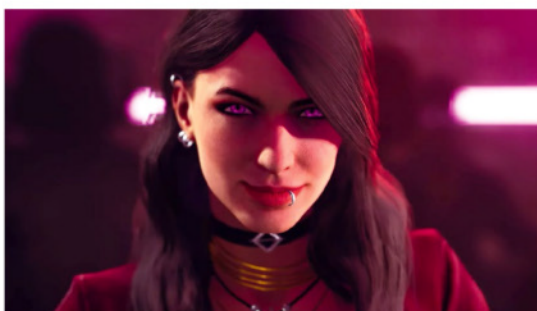
12 months+



THE LAMPLIGHTERS LEAGUE

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Harebrained Schemes

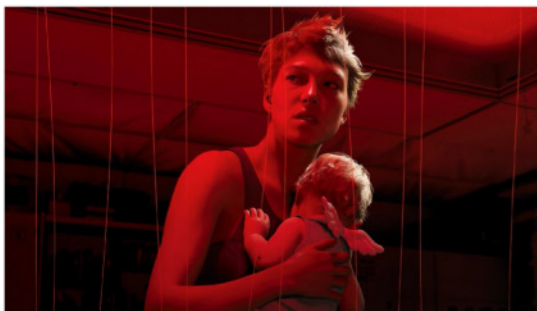
XCOM-like turn-based tactical combat with an alternate 1930s aesthetic, *The Lamplighters League* promises to let gamers sneak and shoot their way through adventures.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, the current state of *Bloodlines 2* remains a mystery. Will we see the RPG return from the dead in the next 12 months?



DEATH STRANDING 2

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Kojima Productions

The sequel to Hideo Kojima's critically acclaimed action adventure game/walking simulator *Death Stranding* is incoming, but with no fixed release date so far.

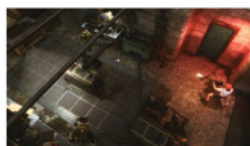
UPGRADED

EXTRA BLOOD

The ability to become a vampire has been a consistent part of the *Elder Scrolls* games since *Daggerfall*, so socialanxiety's cool new mod, *Bloodhunt - Cut Vampire Content Restoration*, which restores cut vamp content from *Skyrim*, is well worth sinking your teeth into. You can grab it here: bit.ly/3Mu5zFe





Classified: France '44

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August

DEVELOPER
Absolutely Games

PUBLISHER
Team17

LINK
absolutelygames.net

CLASSIFIED: FRANCE '44

Wage war on Nazis in this densely layered turn-based strategy game

At one point during my first look at turn-based strategy game *Classified: France '44*, one of the developers stops what he's saying, stands up and starts drawing diagrams on a whiteboard using NATO symbology. I walked into that room barely knowing what a Lee Enfield is; I walked out knowing the difference between 'enfilade' and 'defilade'.

All of which is to say, Absolutely Games is serious about military history. Seriously serious. And that's reflected not just in the premise of its debut game, but in its densely layered systems.

Classified: France '44 is set in... well, France in 1944, during the Nazi occupation. In the run up to D-Day, the Allies deployed a small, elite team of soldiers into the country to aid the French Resistance in undermining German operations. Your job is to take control of that team, building relationships with the fractured factions of the Resistance while using sabotage and guerrilla tactics against the enemy.

The game I'm immediately put in mind of is *XCOM 2*. Though there are no aliens or plasma guns to be seen, the structure is very similar – missions are tense, turn-based affairs, composed of both stealth and firefights with small squads. Outside of the action you have to manage your soldiers, level them up, and secure new equipment for them, while trying to gain and maintain control over territories on an overworld map. Like *XCOM 2*, you're the underdog, surrounded by enemies on

all sides and trying to avoid being uncovered and destroyed, but also dealing with the demands of your quarrelsome allies within the different groups that make up the Resistance.

BETTER JED THAN DEAD

Unlike *XCOM 2*, *Classified: France '44* embraces historical authenticity – the studio wants it to be a respectful reflection of what really happened, which honours the bravery and sacrifice of the special forces and the Resistance. But more than just being drily accurate to the facts, what immediately shows through is that genuine passion for the period. There's a real depth of knowledge on display, that's evident both in the larger premise and in the small details. Each of the soldiers in your squad has their own backstory and history, and though they are fictional characters, the texture of their lives draws on specific aspects of the time, whether that's obscure fronts of the war they've served on, or even their relationship to contemporary pop culture and music.

The combat system is similarly interested in the fine details. That means things like grenade damage falling off the further out from the initial blast you are and weapons being modelled on their historical counterparts, elements that play into the atmosphere of authenticity. But it also leads to some interesting tactical play.

The core concept behind *Classified: France '44*'s battles is the 'fix and flank' – a real-world strategy that has shaped modern military tactics. It's a pretty simple idea – one set of soldiers, ideally toting a light machine gun or similar overwhelming firepower, lays down a barrage of bullets on the enemy that keep them pinned down at their position. Meanwhile, your other soldiers sweep round from the sides for a flanking attack, and catch the foe in a crossfire.

TOP SECRET

It's not a mind-blowing concept – any fan of strategy games has probably implemented something similar in play, and indeed it's not too far away from the standard overwatch-and-flank tactics of *XCOM*. But the way it's implemented in *Classified: France '44* feels pretty special. The key element is morale – the

PLAYED
IT

**EACH OF THE SOLDIERS IN
YOUR SQUAD HAS THEIR OWN
BACKSTORY AND HISTORY**

Classified: France '44

✕ developers use the credo 'every shot counts', and what that means is, even if a shot completely misses, it's guaranteed to chip away at the target's resolve. Get that low enough, and they'll be pinned and unable to effectively shoot back on their turn – and more vulnerable to your attacks. That lets you simulate the fix and flank directly, which is a great tactical puzzle in its own right. But it also opens up all sorts of other interesting decisions.

In one mission I play, I'm sneaking up to a Nazi-fortified building hoping to free a prisoner. The game's stealth system is robust and lavishes the player with useful info about guards' vision and patrol routes – but I manage to get spotted regardless, and the alarm is raised.

Suddenly I'm a rat in a trap – I'm surrounded by enemies on all sides, some of whom are bedded down in cover. What's my escape plan? Well, I can try the obvious and shoot my way out – but there are only a few exposed targets, and going after them may leave me out of position versus the others currently further afield. Alternatively, I can focus on pinning – taking risky shots I know probably won't hit on key enemy targets to effectively disable them and stall for the time I need to manoeuvre into a better situation. But the longer I stall, the closer I get to enemy reinforcements arriving – will I have a strong enough position by then to be able to face increased numbers?

In the end, my hastily improvised plan combines these strategies together – picking off easy targets, pinning down threatening but unassailable ones, gritting my teeth as I roll the dice on a few clutch shots, and using up my pouch of grenades for an extra edge. I trust in the gods of bullet spray and gain some extra damage by targeting enemies at the back of a group first – realistic spread ensures that any bullets flying past someone have a chance to hit them, making crossfire just as deadly as the fix and flank calls for.

By the time the reinforcements get to the battle, things aren't quite as under control as I'd like, but I've managed to get four of my men to a spot where they have a clear line of sight to their arrival point. A few overlapping cones of overwatch allows me to gun them down before they

get a chance to take up position – especially thanks to the ability to, at each overwatch opportunity, choose whether I want to fire or wait for the next possible target, giving me a touch more control over proceedings.

Even after all that, my panicked theft of victory from the jaws of defeat feels like it's barely scraping the surface of what options were available – and all the while you have to try and prevent the enemy using the same tricks against you. Yes, your heroes can be pinned too, and they can sure as hell be flanked if you're not careful. It's a tricky balance to find between historical realism and videogame abstraction – the developers admit to me that they started at a much more granular and accurate level of simulation, and it simply wasn't fun until they started making compromises. But *Classified: France '44* certainly seems to be on the right track, with the real-world elements it uses actively feeding into a more layered strategy experience, not just existing to please history buffs.

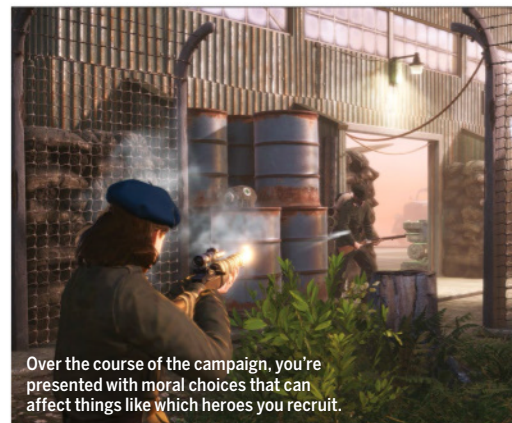
WAR STORIES

I do think, however, that tonally a little something may be getting lost along the way. The game is a very serious take on a very serious conflict – not dour or miserable, but certainly very aware of the realities of war. It seems jarring, then, that for example your soldiers cannot die – if taken out during a mission, they simply retreat from the battle. Not every game needs permadeath, but it's hard not to feel like it would've better served the themes here, with new operatives recruited from the Resistance to replace fallen heroes.

Enemies are split into slightly cartoonish variants, such as imposing, well-armed Heavies and grenade-tossing Sappers who have a chance to explode when they die. Explosive red barrels litter the maps, with Nazis oddly keen to crouch behind them. Unrealistic elements like these certainly enhance the experience of play, but they feel at odds with the tone – a slightly more Hollywood approach might have been a better fit for a game about unkillable special forces.

That gripe aside, *Classified: France '44* should give strategy diehards plenty to get stuck into over the course of its campaign. And if it's a success? The studio is already hinting at plans to do more *Classified* games in future. Vote with your wallets, people, otherwise we might never get *Classified: Emu War '32*.

Robin Valentine



Over the course of the campaign, you're presented with moral choices that can affect things like which heroes you recruit.

RED BARRELS LITTER THE MAPS, WITH NAZIS ODDLY KEEN TO CROUCH BEHIND THEM



ABOVE: Your overall rating at the end of the campaign actually affects how the Normandy landings play out.

LEFT: The UI is very busy, but it's comprehensive, giving you all the information you could possibly need in battle.

F1 Manager 2023



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Frontier Developments

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
f1manager.com

F1 MANAGER 2023

Is this year's competitor a pace-setter packed with upgrades?

Last year *F1 Manager 2022* delivered something we'd all been longing for over many years: a truly great management game set within the sport. So, what's changed for this year's release?

For *F1 2023* there are deeper systems governing both your non-driving staff and the little divas in the cockpits. On the staff side, the recruitment of the sporting director role has been added, and they'll govern your logistical effectiveness including your pit crew's overall reliability and efficiency. Micromanagers can now get stuck right into the pit crew's training schedule, deploying the right balance of training and rest days to keep them sharp, fresh and error-free.

Over on the driver side, a new confidence mechanic adds an extra wrinkle to on-track performance. As drivers perform positively – pulling off overtakes, setting quick sector times and lap PBs – they'll build up confidence, which acts as a performance buff. They'll be more likely to drive quick, stay consistent and pull off of subsequent overtakes when their confidence is high, so you can afford to push them a bit more with your orders.

On the flipside of course, being overtaken, getting stuck behind a driver they can't pass, or making a mistake: these sap confidence. As their confidence diminishes, so does their

ability to make good on your orders to push or overtake. That's a well-judged step towards fleshing out the drivers as convincing, fallible human beings.

SMARTER RACING

The really good bit, though, is in how that all plays out on track this year. Frontier's worked on creating exciting battles between drivers by increasing the number of AI lines through each corner at each circuit. Last year's game had overtakes and incidents, but they didn't happen the way they do in the real sport. From what I saw overtakes will look more scrappy and convincing this year.

You can see that smarter AI at work when a driver's pushing or conserving tyres, too, getting right out onto the kerbs and pushing track limits when they're going all-out, and taking more conservative lines that make less use of the trackside adornments when they're playing it safe. And of course, how good they are at pushing track limits without incident is all tied to their stats as a driver, and their confidence level.

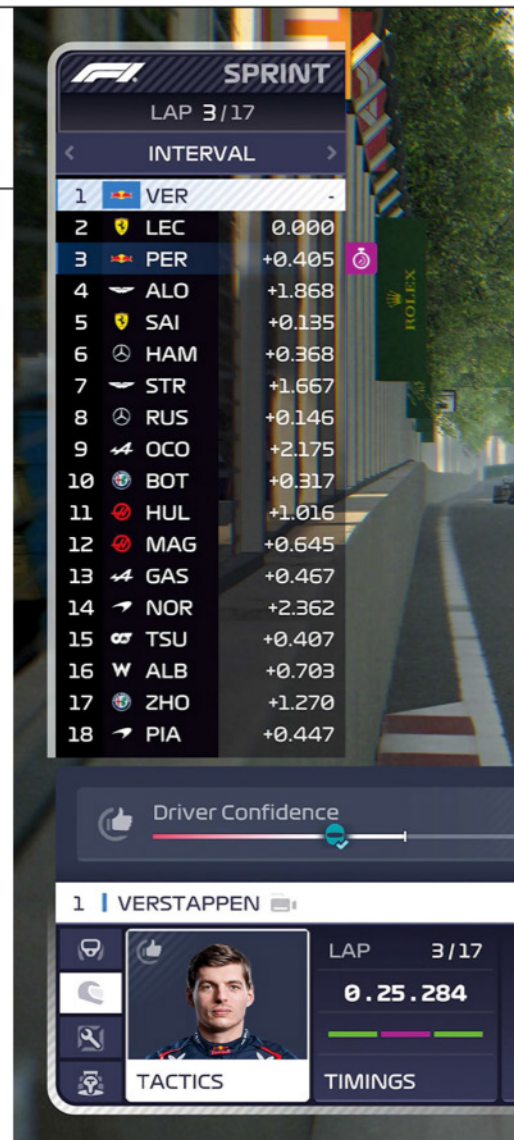
F2 TOO

Speaking of that, F1 and F2 championships are now fully simulated this year, so you've got a more intuitive way to keep track of young driver talent than simply looking at the numbers on their stat screens increase. Just like real motorsport, the best way to put yourself in the shop window as a young driver in *F1 Manager 2023* is to win stuff.

Drivers develop quicker after good results, so you can also intuit that if Jack Doohan's smashing the F2 championship this year, whatever his potential level is, he'll reach it faster off the back of these results and might be ready for F1 that much quicker. This is a new feature that I'm particularly excited about.

Frontier has bigger plans for this year's game too which they mentioned only in passing – a new mode coming, and some more presentation options. It's not easy to bed in a new series and then iterate on it significantly in the space of 12 months. Almost as difficult, as we learned last game, as developing a better front wing than Red Bull's. Maybe this season...

Phil Iwanik



A NEW CONFIDENCE MECHANIC ADDS AN EXTRA WRINKLE TO ON-TRACK PERFORMANCE



ABOVE: AI improvements should make for more incident-laden races.

LEFT: Overworked pit crews make mistakes, and you control their schedule now.

PREVIEW

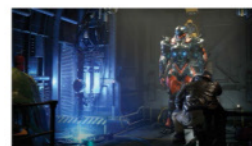
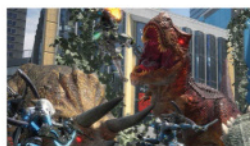
Exoprimal



ABOVE: The T-rex is just as much of a bastard to take down as you'd hope.

RIGHT: Hanging out in the cyberspace lobby before the interdimensional dino battle begins.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
July 14

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
exoprimal.com

EXOPRIMAL

A throwback to experimental Capcom action games

We all have weaknesses videogames exploit to make us love them in spite of any obvious faults. It turns out that one of mine is watching 100 raptors fall out of a portal in the sky, then shooting them with a machine gun. I guess that makes *Exoprimal* an educational videogame?

Exoprimal is a deeply strange game, and somehow the dinosaurs falling from the sky are the most normal thing about it. The story seems like it's headed for a Jurassic Park setup, with your team of special forces operatives heading to an island where some sort of disaster has taken place. But instead of landing, finding a bunch of dinosaurs and then killing them, you first go through an interdimensional time portal controlled by a rogue AI, and then you compete in a Hunger Games-style contest against alternate universe versions of yourself for the AI's amusement. That's where the dinosaur killing comes in.

It's such an unnecessary twist on what would've been a perfectly fine premise – go to island, shoot lots of dinosaurs – that I respect the swerve. The exosuits are Capcom's take on a Japanese tokusatsu series like Power Rangers, simultaneously cheesy and badass. There's a wider variety of them than I expected, broken out into assault, support and tank classes.

Exoprimal is mostly geared towards being a co-op game, so you'll experience the story in cutscenes slightly awkwardly

stuffed between multiplayer matches. Those matches are, again, strange: for the first two-thirds of each you're exclusively in co-op blasting dinosaurs, and then in the last third of the match you go head to head with a competing team in some kind of *Overwatch*-style objective like pushing the payload. As in *Overwatch* you can swap suits at any time, which became an important part of my team's strategy. We'd start out on assault to chew through dinos as fast as possible, then make sure to throw in a tank and healer for PvP.

ANVIL: VAULT BREAKER

Exoprimal doesn't quite fit any of the usual buckets we put multiplayer games in, but I think that's a clever move on Capcom's part. It gives you the chill co-op solidarity of playing with your friends, with a bit of adrenaline at the end when you go up against another team. The race to complete co-op objectives for the majority of the match feels strangely isolated, though – every time you kill a wave of attacking dinos, the AI will inform you whether you're going faster or slower than the other human team. I feel like I have no way to react to this information other than feeling a bit smug or panicked that the other team will have a time advantage when we reach the finale.

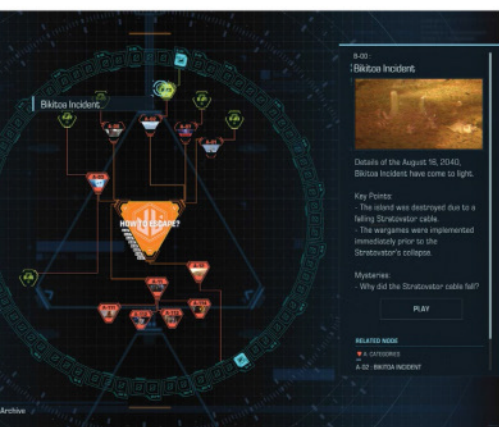
Perhaps *Exoprimal* was saving surprises for later, but it needs some way to affect the other team in the first part of a match – give me a portal gun that lets me send a T-rex across dimensions to grief the other team, or something.

As unconventional as these parts of *Exoprimal* are, its meta progression is the exact opposite. It's lifted straight from the generic F2P game handbook, including loot boxes with cosmetic drops and a battle pass. It's not the best fit for a £50 game, and feels out of step with how people spend money on games right now, and how odd (I say that endearingly) *Exoprimal* otherwise is.

If you took out the cookie cutter monetisation, *Exoprimal* would look like a game spawned from Capcom's prime experimental period in the early 2000s. I don't know if this odd mix of PvE and PvP is going to hook most players, but tossing a grenade into a pile of dinosaurs is, at least for a few hours, a real good time.

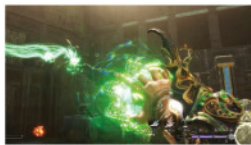
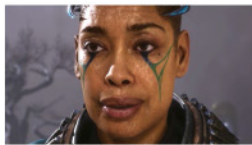
Wes Fenlon

YOU FIRST GO THROUGH A TIME PORTAL CONTROLLED BY A ROGUE AI



PREVIEW

Immortals of Aveum



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
July 20

DEVELOPER
Ascendant Studios

PUBLISHER
EA

LINK
ea.com

IMMORTALS OF AVEUM

Fight a magewar with first-person spell shooting

Immortals of Aveum is an old-fashioned singleplayer FPS, but not in the vein of 'boomer shooters'. Immortals has an Xbox 360 vibe, with enemies that spill out of dropships like Halo 3 grunts and cutscenes in which heroes bond and villains scheme. It's like we're reenacting the transition from corridors to the storytelling ambitions of the mid-2000s.

Today's fascination with '90s shooters suggests a kind of contemporary FPS fan who rejects all post-Quake values, but I think most of us are also suckers for the special abilities of the immersive simmy shooters of the 2000s. Immortals is a fantasy game with spells instead of guns, which gives it a good excuse to stuff the keyboard with powers. By the end of the few hours I had to preview it at EA headquarters recently, I could double jump, hover, yoink enemies off cliffs with a grapple spell, stun or slow opponents, raise a shield to mitigate incoming damage, flip through three primary attack spells, and bust out big specials with the number keys, such as an energy wave that terminates with spikes of earth, good for breaking shields.

An S-tier manoeuvre in any game is the thing where you snag a distant enemy with some variety of harpoon gun, yank them to your face like Scorpion from Mortal Kombat, and then blast them with whatever shotgun equivalent you're working with, and I did that over and over. The shotgun in this case is a surge of red magic from my palm, which has a very

PLAYED
IT

satisfying Iron Man repulsor feel. I also enjoyed hip sniping with the long range attacks: blue beams reminiscent of those trailed by Quake 2's railgun rounds.

My favourite attack was an ultimate spell that charges up over time: a two-handed purple murder beam that feels just like using my favourite Diablo 3 spell, Disintegrate, except in first person. I was delighted to find that bosses don't have any special immunity to this fire hose of damage, and used it to erase more than half of one mini-boss' health in the first few seconds of our fight.

COLOUR CODED

The sense that Immortals is old-fashioned extends to the less fun bits. Invisible walls keep you from having too much fun double jumping, and the speed of your progress through the linear levels is regulated by busywork: locked doors that are opened by hopping around in search of colour-coded switches and shooting them with the correct kind of magic. Aiming my blue spell at the blue switch feels awfully quaint when I'm watching Zelda players solving problems by building bizarre torture machines.

The three types of magic in Immortals are actually called "red", "blue" and "green" by the way. This isn't a fantasy world I foresee becoming a prestige HBO drama. Plucky protagonist Jak and his pragmatic commander are full of that big 2007 energy I keep referring to: it's a cheesy Call of Duty take on fantasy warfare, a hard counter to the gloomy, enigmatic moodiness of Elden Ring.

Immortals director Bret Robbins worked on a few Call of Duty games, an influence also seen in the red reticle that flashes at centre screen to indicate a kill. The vestigial gun sight is funny to see in a game about wizards, but it feels no less like videogame bubble wrap here than it does in CoD. It's there because it's fun.

I like that simplicity. Immortals isn't trying to be a graphical powerhouse, an extraction shooter trendchaser, or even a retro throwback. It isn't self-conscious about being old-fashioned, it just is old-fashioned, with an uncomplicated reverence for the era of The Darkness and The Force Unleashed. I respect it!

Tyler Wilde



A HARD COUNTER TO THE GLOOMY, ENIGMATIC MOODINESS OF ELDEN RING

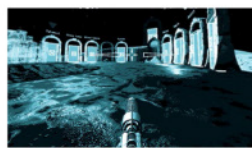
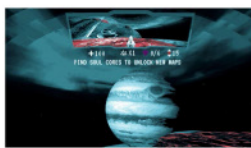
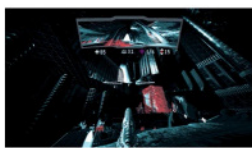


ABOVE: Talk to the hand!

LEFT: Colour-coded weakpoints have been in games for decades: why mess with success?

FAR LEFT: The mid-2000s videogame protagonist vibes are overpowering.

Hellscreen



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

March 9 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Jamie D

PUBLISHER

In-house

LINK

bit.ly/40iSYbP

HELLSCREEN

Shooting backward to move forward in this sick FPS

When I first read the words “FPS with a rearview mirror”, I figured it was just a neat trick: a game having some yuks with old rendering tricks like the mirrors in *Deus Ex* or *Mario 64*, with the real meat and potatoes of the shooter still having to carry the day.

Playing *Hellscreen* immediately put those thoughts to bed – this isn’t a gimmick, it’s the essential mechanic of this new retro shooter, while the game’s twisty levels and unique progression prove that this mechanic isn’t the only trick solo developer Jamie D has up his sleeve.

Hellscreen gives you a mini, lower-res screen in the upper quadrant of your view at all times. Left click fires forward, while right click fires backwards and does quadruple damage while you’re in motion. This encouraged me to primarily play in ‘strafing runs’, zooming past enemies while aiming behind as I went. It lends *Hellscreen* a rhythm all its own, and the game also makes some enemies and secrets only visible in the second screen. There are even areas where your main view is occluded and you can only navigate in reverse. My only complaint is that some of the art plays havoc with the second screen’s low resolution – the mine level in particular has bright white floors that give off a blinding, Xbox 360-style bloom in the mirror that makes it impossible to aim.

The levels are top notch though – I think it’s an achievement that *Hellscreen*’s

main gimmick could stand on its own with weaker level design, while its maps and innovative progression could in turn carry a less interesting shooter. Together they’re a must-play experience.

IT’S-A-ME, HELLSCREEN!

Progression through *Hellscreen* is gated by collectibles in a way that reminds me most of old school 3D platformers like *Mario 64* or *Spyro*. *Hellscreen* introduces a light bit of Metroidvania backtracking as well, with certain weapons destroying environmental obstacles and opening new paths through earlier missions. Further, there are these ghostly platforms scattered around, teasing you, that can only be made whole after flicking a later-game switch.

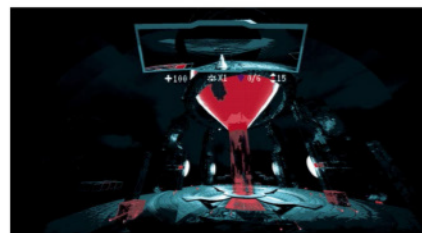
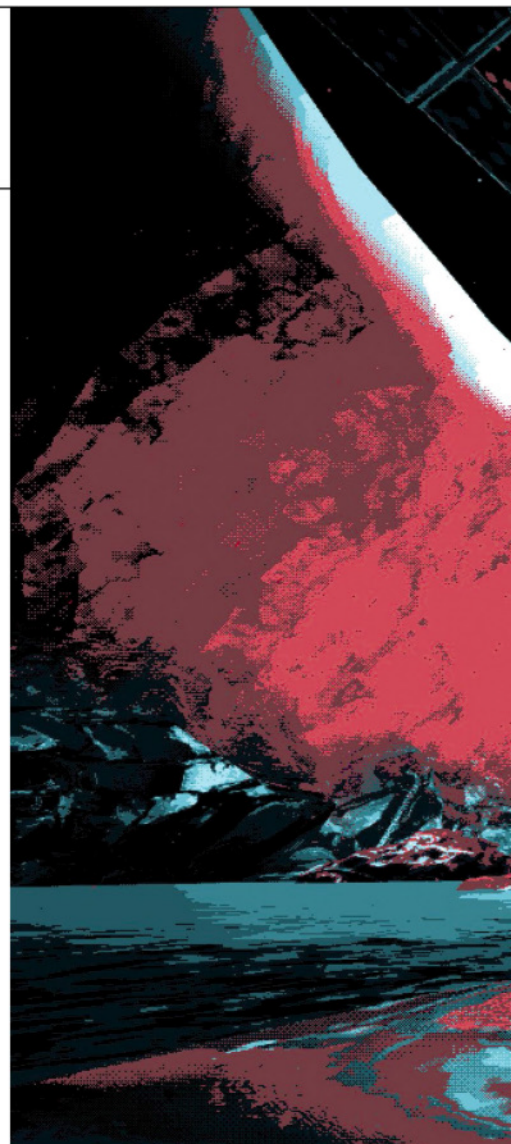
Pressing Tab at any time warps you to a gallery of portals to the different missions like an old 3D platformer hub. Pressing Tab again seamlessly drops you back into the action like you’d just unpaused the game, and the technical wizardry behind that and *Hellscreen*’s constant double rendering of any given scene is seriously impressive. In addition to the wow factor, I found this quick loading encouraged me to duck in and out of maps when I got stuck or found a new tool that would open up a dead end from earlier, though I wish

level-by-level progress for second-order collectibles (find six little purple guys to make one big red guy!) would persist between loads, encouraging even more backtracking and improvisation.

It’s a unique setup for a shooter, and I was also surprised at just how far *Hellscreen* pushes its red and teal alien art style. My favourite is the mission called Fragmented which sees you platforming around a giant plant in the middle of an arena. I came in expecting Giger-esque hellscares, and the game’s got those, but it’s really refreshing how much variety is here in the first episode alone.

Hellscreen really delivers in Early Access, and though it only took me two hours to reach its final level, I’m sure I found less than half its collectibles, and episodic shooters are one of the best fits for an Early Access model – this isn’t an RPG or a survival game where you’ll log on in half a year to find a different early game.

Ted Litchfield

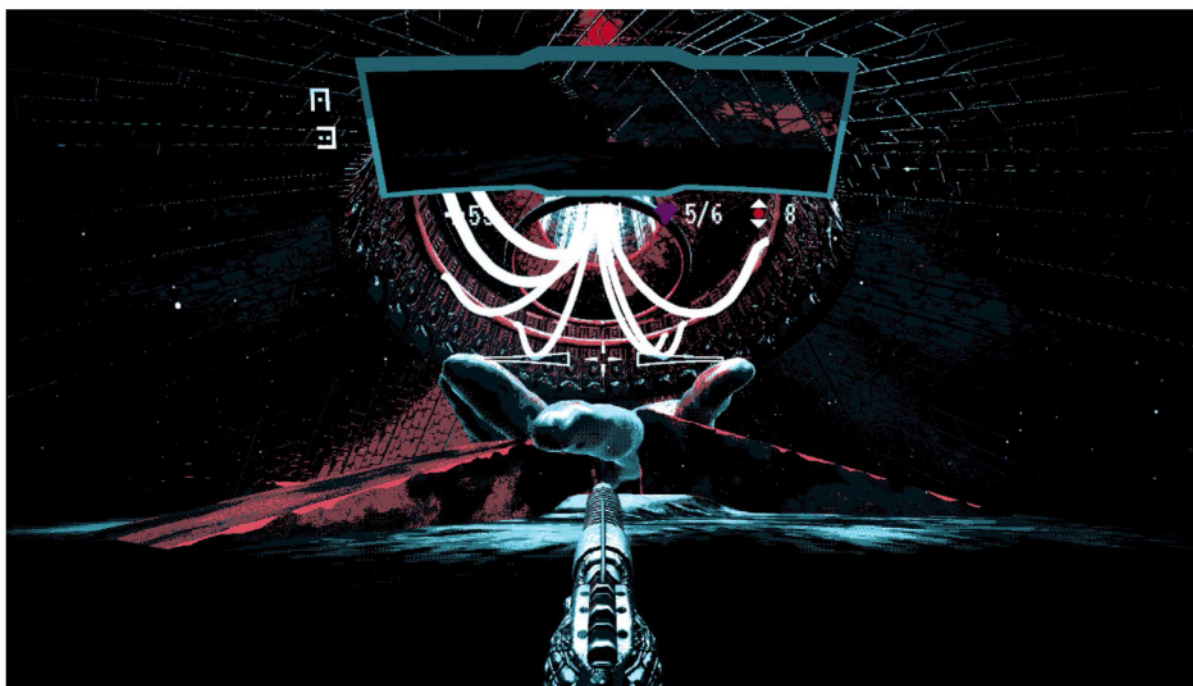


I WAS SURPRISED AT JUST HOW FAR HELLSCREEN PUSHES ITS RED AND TEAL ART STYLE



ABOVE: The shortest level in EA, but maybe my favourite.

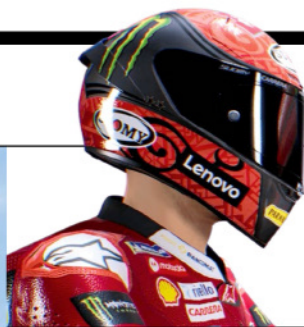
LEFT: Hey bro, give me a hand here! Get it? A hand?



PREVIEW

MotoGP 23





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
8 June

DEVELOPER
Milestone

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
motogpvideogame.com

MOTOGP 23

You'll want to pop a helmet on for this one

Milestone has been constructing something strange, rare and quite special over at the Milanese headquarters for a few years now. A licensed racing simulator of the 'careful what you wish for' variety, one so dedicated to realism that to all but the most seasoned and dedicated virtual riders, their *MotoGP* games are astonishingly difficult to survive a lap of without eating a large serving of gravel trap. Obviously, there was only one direction *MotoGP 23* could have gone in: it's made it even harder.

Actually, you could make the argument that the addition of AI aids this year has made the game more accessible than it ever was. Peruse the pre-release press materials and you'll see a promo vid featuring Moto3 rider Jaime Masia, legendary *MotoGP* esports racer Trastevere73 and two under-10s all playing and enjoying it. That's not an inaccurate view of the racing game on offer here – with maximum assists, this is indeed a very accessible experience. But the simulation at the heart of the game is even more rigorous now, and when you turn those assists off and get a feel for what's really happening from the physics model – well, I'm not ashamed to say I find it outright scary.

START YOUR ENGINES

For the last two releases, the talking point was the braking. Prior to its jump over to Unreal Engine, Milestone's

MotoGP series was pitched about two thirds towards simulation on the 'simcade' spectrum; forgiving but convincing, similar to the balance Codemasters' *F1* series perennially occupies. But lately it's gone all-in on simulation, a fact you were made aware of the first time you slammed on the brakes, as your muscle memory from *MotoGP*s 2013-2019 had taught you, and watched your rider enter Earth's orbit.

This time the braking's still a delicate performance of pressure, balance and timing that takes deft left trigger inputs and a precise control of the bike's lean angle as you tip it into the corner. The difference now is that getting on the power is just as demanding.

The real sport's been revolutionised by the aero innovations that have made their way onto the fairings of factory machines, particularly the forward-thinking Ducati Desmosedici designs of the last five years, and by significant progress in the on-bike electronics.

Where once you'd see riders scrapping with their bikes to keep their front ends down coming out of low-speed corners, now you see them struggle to pop a deliberate wheelie over the finish line. Modern *MotoGP* prototypes are just a different beast. And in *MotoGP 23*, you finally feel all those aero and electronic innovations in the character of the bike.

Like never before, applying the throttle makes the bike want to stand itself up. You can feel the aero wings, the ride height device and electronics all working together to limit your steering range, in a way that's both scary – did I mention that? – and exhilarating. This has never been a series short of a sense of speed, but now it really feels like your bike's trying to rip free of you and break the sound barrier.

GET A HANDLE ON IT

The impact of these handling model changes is massive. I found it totally altered my approach to riding – the only thing I was able to carry over from *MotoGP 22* was my new delicate braking muscle memory. I started to look at each corner in terms of mid-corner speed, rather than just the braking, turn-in and back on the power points. If I focused too

PLAYED
IT

THE BRAKING'S A DELICATE PERFORMANCE OF PRESSURE, BALANCE AND TIMING



✖ much on hitting those turn-in points or trying to adhere to an ideal line, I'd over-ride the bike and either lose buckets of time, or fall off.

And I fell off a lot. I fell off more than Marc Marquez and Joan Mir's combined practice, quali and race crashes this season in my first race alone. It isn't like other racing sims: you can't just plug in a wheel and get that 1:1 control. You need to make incredibly deft inputs on the brake, the throttle, and the analogue stick. I found that I was hardly ever at 100% braking pressure or throttle during a lap, and every steering input had to be eased into, modulated with fine motor skills.

I started to worry that this latest game might simply be past my skill level, that Milestone had gone too far. But by being less of a perfectionist and changing my mindset to 'just try and get around the track' rather than hitting preconceived braking and turn-in points, I started to smooth out my riding style. Now I only crash once every 20 seconds, rather than every 10. That's progress.

But that's the sharp end of *MotoGP 23*, with all the assists off. Place the 'neural aids' – throttle, steering and braking help – to maximum and it's a different game. One that all but rides itself. You can certainly guarantee you'll stay on the bike more and compete for wins against the AI at lower difficulties, which might be a nice entry point for younger racers or *MotoGP* fans without prior game experience.

NEURAL AIDS

You don't get much feeling from the bike with the neural aids kicking in this much, though. At the moderate preset, you get a bit more of the liveliness coming back though, and that works as a good training tool to get you used to the bike's behaviour. But however good the neural aids are, *MotoGP 23* isn't going to feel totally satisfying unless you're using little to none of them. And in order to do that, you need lots of track time and patience.

Beyond handling model changes, there's a substantial shakeup to career mode this year. Working your way up from Moto3 or Moto2 and onto the big bikes has long been the most engrossing

part of this series, but it's always been presented in a straightforward manner without any of *NBA 2K's* MyCareer narrative sparkle or *FIFA's* 'The Journey' character development. This year it looks like that might change.

A revamped career mode presentation places the focus on rivalries, and looks to chart your progress in a different way, something more cinematic. Through 'turning points' you're offered decisions that affect your career trajectory like moving up a category. Career mode's always been the main event in this series, so it's great to see this iteration trying something new here. Anything to deepen the feeling of being a rider in the real sport.

There are smaller improvements and additions too, like fresh animations. Gear changes with a tap of the boot are more fluid and convincing, and I noticed some new apology gestures I haven't seen before in the series. They're much subtler than the addition of flag to flag races however, where in wet conditions riders can pit in and hop onto a bike set up for wet weather and shod with the correct tyres. In reality we've seen some of the most exciting races in living memory come from these conditions, like Brad Binder's incredible win at the Red Bull Ring in 2021 and Jack Miller's Le Mans win that same year. Their addition to *MotoGP 23* means an extra variable, one more tactical wrinkle to consider, and a possibility for a rider who's otherwise been off the pace to prevail through great timing and tactics.

BUT IT POURS

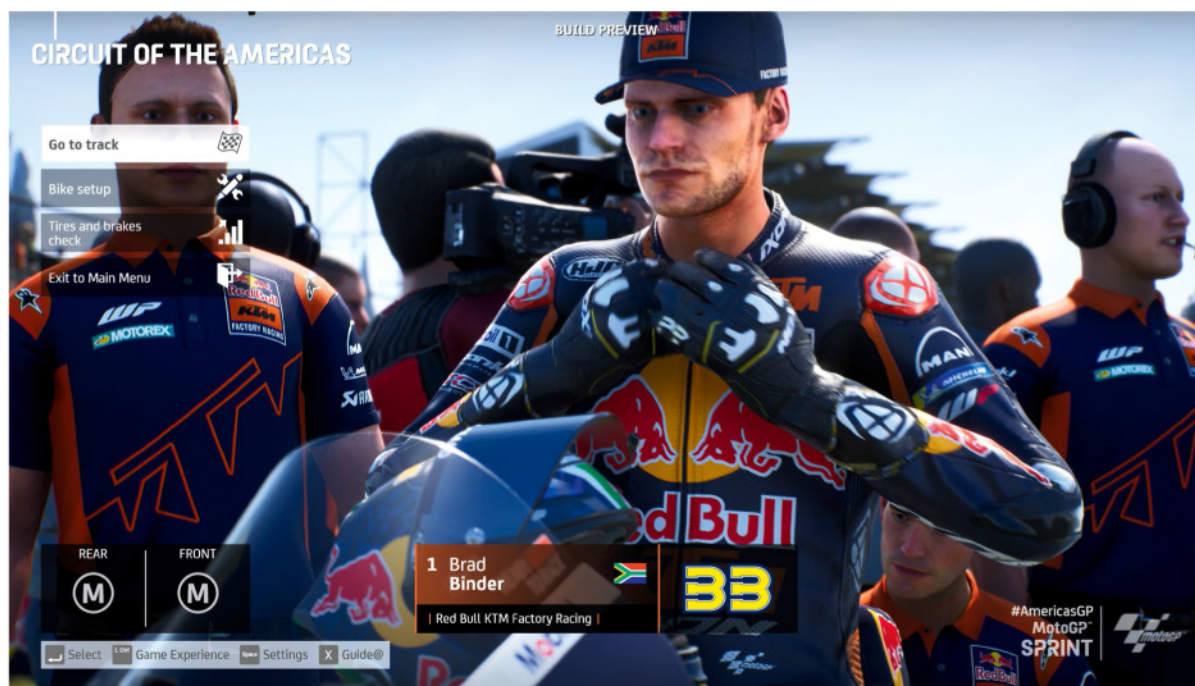
It might not take a downpour to provide some unexpected results though. I was pleased to see riders making plenty of mistakes under their own volition in the preview build, out-braking themselves and running wide into tight turns, jostling with each other, and generally behaving like fallible humans on bikes, instead of the procession of perfect racing line robots who we usually contest races with in the genre.

There's a racing game of real substance here. One that's incredibly challenging, frequently frustrating, but never so demanding that it becomes alienating. The new neural aids don't negate the problem of difficulty – they just delay your inevitable transition to riding without them, and that's always going to be hard. But if career mode and the other accompanying changes land just right, the difficulty will be worth it.

Phil Iwaniuk



YOU DON'T GET MUCH FEELING FROM THE BIKE WITH THE NEURAL AIDS KICKING IN



ABOVE: Maverick Vinales, making one of his trademark 'cautious' race starts.

LEFT: Brad 'Mr Sunday' Binder. Or 'Mr Flashback Button', as he's known under my control.



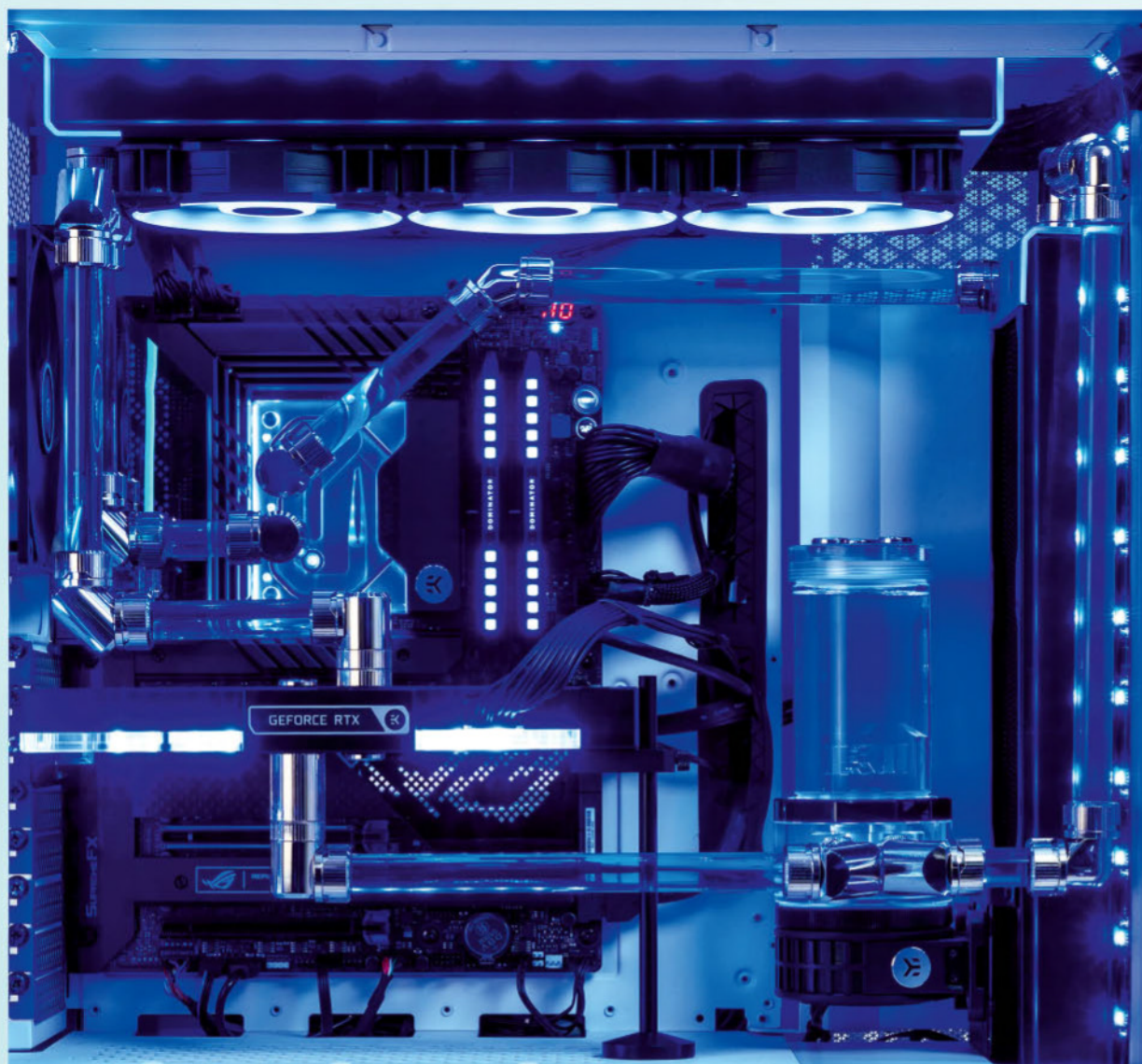
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ROAD WARRIORS

BROKEN ROADS brings the end of the world back home

By Jody Macgregor

Here's how Australian *Broken Roads* is: instead of magic potions, you drink beer. Game director Craig Ritchie casually mentions this when listing consumables, alongside bandages and first aid kits. "You can't get magic potions in our game so we have multiple sources of beer," he says. "The beers have different abilities."

Broken Roads is so Australian one of its character archetypes is summed up as someone who "wouldn't even blink in a shit storm". Funny thing is, this post-apocalyptic homage to classic RPGs like *Fallout* wasn't always set in Australia. It wasn't even always an RPG. When Ritchie





Broken Roads

➤ first told a friend about his videogame idea in 2019, it was a tactics game, “A road trip with tactical battles along the way.” The focus was on turn-based combat, and the setting was a “pos-apoc place”.

That friend was Jethro Naude, who became co-founder of Drop Bear Bytes with Ritchie, and *Broken Roads* became their first game. But not without changes along the way. Within a month they realised it made sense for an Australian studio to set its Mad Max-esque game in Australia, and they wanted it to be about more than just combat. They wanted to deepen the characters, expand the story, make it more like the game they both consider their favourite: *Baldur's Gate 2*. “We made a decision, I think in early February,” Ritchie says. “This is going to be a narrative-driven RPG like the greats of the genre that we love.”

As their ambition expanded, so did the studio, with new staff acquired by diverse means. Composer and audio lead Tim Sunderland was found via Reddit, while narrative director Leanne Taylor-Giles came as a recommendation from creative lead Colin McComb, the two having worked on *Torment: Tides of Numenera*.

SLANG GANG

The larger, more spread-out team was useful when it came to ensuring the dialogue was accurate. *Broken Roads* is full of evocative Australian slang. Children are called “ankle-biter” or “sprog”, an overconfident merc’s “a legend in his own lunchbox”, and insults you’ll hear include “derro” and “bogan”. My favourite phrase in

FOREBEARS

Some of the games that inspired Drop Bear Bytes



FALLOUT

Not just because it's post-apocalyptic, but because it's a classless RPG with characters defined by skills and karma. Though game director Craig Ritchie notes: “It did require a little bit of an exploit in knowing exactly where to go. But that's one of the most inspirational games behind this game.”



QUEST FOR GLORY

Ritchie again, “*Quest for Glory* was a direct influence on this game as well, right down to the design of one of the guilds in the major town. We copied some of the stuff from the Adventurers Guild in the original. I just loved the freedom and I loved the RPG combined with the adventure game.”



PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

An RPG based on a D&D setting whose rulebook sums up one of its themes as “philosophers with clubs”, what your character believes is the most important thing. *Broken Roads*' creative lead Colin McComb was one of its designers, and Leanne Taylor-Giles even has a *Planescape* tattoo.



ULTIMA 4: QUEST OF THE AVATAR

This 1985 RPG measured player morality with eight virtues. *Broken Roads* has a moral compass with four quadrants, and an arc that represents how far your actions are spread across them. A visual depiction of your narrow-mindedness or extremism.

Broken Roads is “Technicolor yawn”, a poetic way to describe vomit. What counts as Australian slang is a divisive topic among Australians, with residents of different states baffled to learn their neighbours use different words. “Even Leanne and I disagree on some things and we’re both from Queensland,” Sunderland says. Because Australian culture is often depicted inaccurately in fiction, especially the accents, people are protective of what counts as ‘real’ slang. Whether you call a potato slice that’s been battered and deep-fried a potato cake, scallop, or fritter can start fights.

“It’s interesting,” says Taylor-Giles, “because my husband grew up in Victoria and I grew up in



LEFT: Combat against moving targets hardly seems sporting.

RIGHT: The pub's sold out of peace, love, hope and merlot.

THEY TOOK THOUSANDS OF PHOTOS AND AUDIO RECORDINGS OF PLACES LIKE THE SUPER PIT

Queensland. I'll turn to him and I'll say, 'Have you ever heard this phrase?' He's like, 'No, what does it mean?' Then I have to think and go, 'I don't actually know.' Then it's this whole etymological journey to figure out." She found a source for accurate dialogue equally close to home: older relatives. "I just call my grandma or my uncle and listen to them chat for a while. 'Yeah, those are some good phrases,' and I put them in the game."

Further research meant travelling around Western Australia, the state *Broken Roads* is set in, and in particular its wheatbelt region. They took thousands of photos and audio recordings of places like the Super Pit, which used to be Australia's biggest open-cut gold mine. It's a hole 600 metres deep that makes a sound Taylor-Giles calls "a drone like the background of the universe".

Another location visited was Wave Rock – a hill naturally formed into a breaking wave the team compares to Erana's Peace, the peaceful haven in *Quest for Glory: So You Want to be a Hero*. Sunderland's quite pleased he captured authentic audio to accompany it. "When you're in Wave Rock [in the game] you're hearing Wave Rock exactly where you are," he says. "Not just Western Australia, but exactly where you're standing."

Sunderland also composed the score, balancing gentle piano with instruments he figured could be constructed in a wasteland, making them out of scrap and broken guitars. He wrote from the perspective of, "A musician that lives in a tin shed that's had a bit too much sunstroke and has collected all these musical instruments and synthesisers and whatnot over the years. They're just experimenting in this little shed."

They sound like the kind of rattle-taggle instruments only a wasteland scavenger or Tom Waits could love, and demanded to be played a certain way. "Playing that cigar box guitar is awful, because I've used nails on it as the frets, and they're sharp and they're rusty and I probably got tetanus. It really changes the way that you play an instrument because you think it's just a guitar, but then you pick it up and you go, 'This does not feel like a guitar. This feels like a weapon.'"

The final layer of authenticity came via reference photos, from which building facades were faithfully rendered (minus logos, for legal reasons). *Broken Roads* doesn't look photorealistic, however, with a painterly art style and visible brushstrokes.

"I want players to feel like they're playing in concept art," Ritchie says. "I've often thought concept art looked better than what actually made it in the game. We started off with the same art team that did the *Shadowrun Returns* series of RPGs. They were working with the art director to get the style down, however that was all 2D, hand-drawn sprites for 3D characters walking around on flat ground. As we've got the publisher funding and more investments on, we've managed to increase the budget and now we've recreated the whole world in 3D."



STATE OF ORIGIN

Broken Roads has four playable prologues, one for each character archetype like *Dragon Age: Origins*. As a Hired Gun, my origin involves joining a party of scouts for a job escorting an engineer to Kokeby Waystation – a train depot converted to a market – where we'll rendezvous with another traveller, then take both to the nearest town. Along the way I pick up sidequests like dealing with a mere hired to protect Kokeby who has become a bully. Backed up by two armed scouts I try threatening him, but he doesn't take kindly to that. It ends in a shootout.

Despite modern touches like the moral compass that tracks your decisions and measures your philosophical leaning across four axes (humanist, utilitarian, Machiavellian and nihilist), it feels like a classic CRPG rather than a radical reinvention of the genre. More *Bogan's Gate* than *Drongo Elysium*, really.

Still, seeing traits activated by reaching certain scores in the moral compass – like Anomic Aggression, a reward for nihilism that improves your stats at the cost of allies finding you disconcerting – it's hard not to think of *Disco Elysium*, even though I first saw *Broken Roads* demoed at PAX Australia in October, 2019, days before *Disco Elysium* came out. “We are unashamedly copying *Fallout 2*, *Planescape: Torment*, *Pillars 2*, *Baldur's Gate*,” Ritchie says. “Those are our, ‘Yep, we took from those.’ *Disco Elysium*, we even had our art style defined and people have said, ‘Look, you’re copying the art!’ I promise you, we were nine months in before we even saw that game.”

Disco Elysium did end up having some influence on *Broken Roads*, though. A *Broken Roads* mechanic where players learn things from books was so similar to *Disco's* Thought Cabinet, which lets players internalise specific memories and ideas in return for changes to their stats and other effects, that it was pulled and is being

BELOW: The first fight's easy, unless you have a phobia of mannequins.



**FEELS LIKE A CLASSIC CRPG
RATHER THAN A RADICAL
REINVENTION OF THE GENRE**

rethought. “We designed something so similar we were like, if we put this in people will just think we’re ripping it off completely,” Ritchie says.

Second, *Disco Elysium* being successful despite its lack of combat pushed them to include additional non-violent ways of solving problems. “We’d always planned to have the mix,” Ritchie says, “but I’d say it’s swung the needle a bit more into having more of those.”

When you’re faced with a problem, Taylor-Giles says, “You can solve it with violence, you can solve it with dialogue, or if you are over here, and you’re like, ‘I wonder if I take this item the entire way across the world, if that’s gonna have an impact?’ It does.”

“And sometimes you can just bribe people as well,” adds Ritchie. “If you’ve got enough money.”

PHILOSOPHERS WITH CLUBS

Replaying the demo as a less utilitarian and more humanist character I do exactly that, paying Kokeby’s thuggish merc to leave town instead of killing him. There were other dialogue options I couldn’t choose, shown in struck-through text – something you can toggle in the finished game if you’d rather not know what you’re being locked out of. I’d definitely prefer to have them hidden. Seeing my character isn’t enough of a humanist to be able to offer a sick man some water makes me want to game the system so I’m not locked out of options like that in the future, rather than just roleplaying.

Taylor-Giles points out that base-level options are always available, no matter which philosophical quadrants your spread covers, as well as ones in a ‘moral history’ keeping track of what you used to believe. “If you start off as a humanist and you’ve somehow managed to do a full 180 and go round to Machiavellian, but then you want to



AT LEAST IT'S AN ETHOS

Forget paragon/renegade, are you a nihilist?

1 PHILOSOPHICAL LEANING

Measures your morality with precise percentages. Utilitarians believe in the greater good, humanists value the dignity of each individual, Machiavellians say power is an end to itself and the end justifies the means, nihilists think nothing matters and therefore look out for themselves.

2 MORAL HISTORY

Every decision you've made is tracked and measured so you can regret it later with maximum precision. Telling a boy that people aren't defined by their bad decisions made me 1° more humanist, saying it's OK to kill a few bad people to make things better for the rest of us made me 5° more utilitarian.



3 THE GOLDEN ARC

The variety of options that will be available to you, and which traits will activate. Actions near the sides of the arc make it widen and even rotate, while those in the middle make it narrow and extend towards the edge. The more broad-minded you are, the less you're able to consider extreme solutions.

4 MORAL TRAITS

The humanist trait *Condemned To Be Free* boosts speech and widens the compass arc, but inflicts a trait called 'despair' as you become aware of your responsibility and the consequences of actions. *Better Feared Than Loved* makes Machiavellians better at fighting, worse at everything else.

TOP: Some of the concept art feels very *Mad Maxy*.

ABOVE: Brown is realistic, in Western Australia.

take on a humanist option and it's within your moral memory you can still do that because of the person that you used to be."

"It's not so much locking as limiting," says Ritchie. "Not trying to put a PR spin on it, but it adjusts to your playstyle, it evolves with your character."

Taylor-Giles mentions that while some ways of solving problems will be open to characters based on which moral quadrants they're in, others will be based on their origin or previous actions, "so it feels like it's a tapestry that you're taking part in. We try to come up with as many solutions as possible."

Though they added enough peaceful solutions that a full pacifist playthrough will be possible, if difficult, they never considered removing combat altogether. As far as *Broken Roads* has travelled from its turn-based tactics origin, that remains non-negotiable. As Ritchie explains: "Publishers actually contacted us and said, 'Hey, if you could remove combat from the game, then we'll publish [it], look at *Disco Elysium*.' They basically wanted us to change it completely. We were like, 'No, we are a traditional RPG. We are gonna have combat.'"

Though he considers comparisons to *Disco Elysium* a compliment, he's resigned that *Broken Roads* will "probably never get out of its shadow". Which is frankly an issue every CRPG faces now. "We're not going to spend our whole next six months' marketing campaign telling people, 'No, no, we didn't copy *Disco Elysium*,'" he says. "We'll let people on Reddit say what they want." ■

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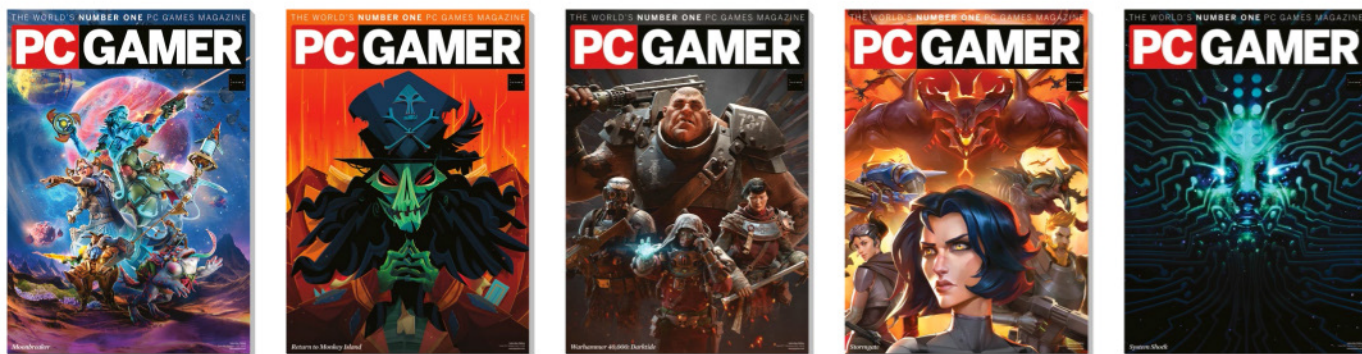
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THE MOST APOCALYPTIC GAMES ON PC

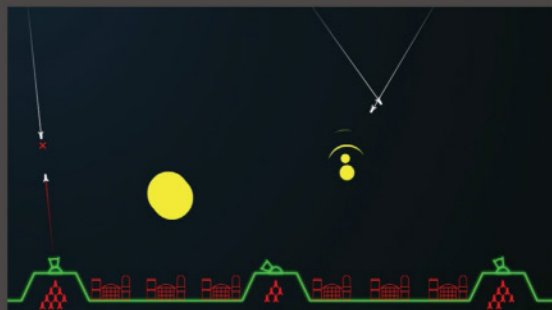
Charting PC gaming's radioactive history.

By Rick Lane

Humanity's anxiety over the prospect of nuclear Armageddon has manifested itself in countless creative ways, but it is videogames that have perhaps thought longest and hardest about the ramifications of atomic annihilation, building worlds dedicated to exploring what happens next.

These games can be cynical, satirical, melancholy and sometimes outright goofy, but they are all ultimately visions of hope. They posit that, however twisted by fallout and factionalism it may be, life does go on after nuclear Armageddon. And they pick through the bones of the past to salvage a future.





Missile Command 1980

Videogaming first contended with the prospect of nuclear annihilation in Atari's classic. Designed by Dave Theurer, this arcade game sees players defending a line of cities from ballistic bombardment by blowing up the titular missiles in midair with counter-projectiles. It's worth noting that the missiles of *Missile Command* are not explicitly nuclear missiles. But given when the game was released, and the fact that it involves defending entire cities from complete destruction, it's easy to imagine how *Missile Command* played reflected the worries of players living in the shadow of the Cold War.



Wargames 1984

Developers Coleco clearly weren't listening when the NORAD computer uttered the line, "The only way to win is not to play" in the 1983 movie, instead creating an interactive version of the defence system. *Wargames* plays like a slower, grander, version of *Missile Command*, with players defending a wireframe USA from attack by missiles, bombers, and submarines. If the destruction reaches DEFCON 1 for 60 seconds, NORAD deploys an automated counterstrike and a global thermonuclear war. To win, your goal is not to defeat the enemy, but to hold them off long enough for a ceasefire to be reached.

OUR RADIOACTIVE FUTURE

The end of the world never ends. Here are three more nuclear-minded games landing on PC soon



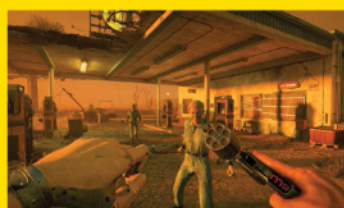
STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL DEC 2023

For all the previous *Stalker* games have done well, one thing the series has never managed is a truly contiguous open world. *Heart of Chernobyl* aims to change that, letting players lose themselves in a vast and seamless realisation of the Zone. The game's development was temporarily derailed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but the game is now set for a release this December.



ASHFALL Q3 2024

Developed by Netease, *Ashfall* is an ambitious blend of third-person cover shooter and post-apocalyptic MMO. Currently pipped for release next year, it boasts a vast world filled with secrets, talking rabbits, and a score co-produced by movie maestro Hans Zimmer.



EXEKILLER 2024

A post-apocalyptic western with cyberpunk trim, *Exekiller* puts you in the shoes of a bounty hunter in the service of a globally powerful corporation. The game lets you travel around its semi-open world in your stylish Appaloosa hovercar.

Wasteland 1988

The first game to imagine life after a nuclear holocaust established the template for so much of what would follow. Brian Fargo's 1988 classic brought players a fully realised world arisen from the ashes of the past. *Wasteland* concealed beneath its pixelly landscape a terrifying array of monsters and a kooky sense of humour. Indeed, the game's ambition for narrative worldbuilding stretched beyond the scope of what PCs could offer at the time, with much of the story held in a manual players are frequently asked to refer to. This, alongside the tricky text-based combat, makes the original *Wasteland* a difficult game to return to today.



FALLOUT'S WEIRD HUMOUR AND TASTE FOR ULTRA-VIOLENCE GAVE IT THE EDGE IT NEEDED



Fallout & Fallout 2 1997-98

The game that would become synonymous with virtual nuclear apocalypse was supposed to be a direct sequel to *Wasteland*, but Interplay (run by Brian Fargo) couldn't secure the licence from holder Electronic Arts. Hence, Fargo suggested the title *Fallout*, as an alternative, and one of PC gaming's greatest series was born.

Given how familiar its aesthetic and ideas have become, it can be hard to articulate the significance of *Fallout*'s arrival on PC back in

1997. But at the time, the RPG was distinctly out of favour, as games like *Quake* and *Command & Conquer* made shooters and real-time strategy the dominant genres. But *Fallout*'s retro-futurist vibe, weird humour, and taste for the old ultra-violence gave it the edge it needed in the attitude-era of '90s culture, luring players into what is still a thoroughly nerdy game of nuanced character building and challenging stat-based combat.

Fallout was followed by a sequel which, remarkably,

released just a year later.

Production on *Fallout 2* actually started before the original game released, with Black Isle given just nine months to make it.

All of which makes *Fallout 2*'s success even more incredible. Despite its curtailed development, it offers a substantially larger world than the first game, introducing more elaborate locations. The game also tightens up many of the mechanics of the original, streamlining elements like party management, looting, and companion respawning. And,

of course, it builds upon the game's choice-based narrative. The game's scope and flexibility means many fans still regard it as the high-point of the series.

This is a nuclear apocalypse viewed from a very different perspective from that of *Missile Command*. In the '90s, the spectre of nuclear Armageddon had faded considerably with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the gleeful silliness and kitsch retro vibes of *Fallout* reflect the relative safety in which Interplay explored these themes.



Defcon 2006

Defcon is the evil twin of 1984's *Wargames*. Whereas Coleco's game was about preventing nuclear war, *Defcon* is about provoking one. It sees you unleashing your full nuclear arsenal to exact as much punishment upon your enemies as you can, while attempting to minimise the casualties on your own side.

Through its simple vector-graphics presentation and cold statistical scorecount, *Defcon* makes the incomprehensible horror of nuclear war horrifically comprehensible. As the yellow radiation symbols denoting nuclear launches turn into white flashes representing nuclear impact, the body count begins to tick up by millions and the global radiation level steadily rises. In this way, even a victory can leave little to celebrate, as your drive to destroy your foes leaves the Earth uninhabitable. Truly a singular experience.



BUILDING A WORLD THAT INTERROGATES UKRAINE'S NUCLEAR TRAUMA

STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl 2007

Shadow of Chernobyl isn't strictly a post-apocalyptic game, as its irradiated exclusion zone is limited to a 30km radius surrounding the world's most infamous power plant. Nonetheless, as a game about nuclear anxiety from the one country to experience genuine nuclear disaster outside of Japan, it is a remarkable artefact.

STALKER takes place after an imagined second explosion has rocked the Chernobyl NPP. Players assume the role of a scavenger seeking to profit from collecting valuable materials created by this mysterious event. Inspired by the Russian sci-fi novel *Roadside Picnic*, STALKER uses this premise to build a

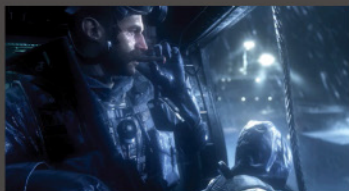
world that interrogates Ukraine's nuclear trauma. As players explore the exclusion zone, they must contend with the warped spawn of Chernobyl's fallout, ranging from hazardous gravitational anomalies that can tear Stalkers apart, to terrifying mutants like invisible Bloodsuckers and gasmask-wearing Snorks.

Yet the game also represents the strange allure of Chernobyl. In reality, the disaster and evacuation of the surrounding areas has made the exclusion zone a unique ecosystem, one that has become both a desired tourist destination and a thriving habitat for nature. *Shadow of Chernobyl* embodies this side of the power plant's personality too, in its lush pastoral

environments and advanced A-life AI simulation. Moreover, the Zone's human pull is reflected in the factions that fight over the valuable artefacts created by the Zone.

GSC Game World followed up *Shadow of Chernobyl* with a prequel named *Clear Sky*. Although more systemically ambitious, *Clear Sky* suffered from a serious lack of balance and polish. The series reached its zenith in its third entry, 2010's *Call of Prip'yat*. Not only did CoP restructure the game into much larger open areas, it also introduced emissions, vast zonewide anomalies that forced players to throw themselves into the nearest shelter, regardless of what might be lurking inside.

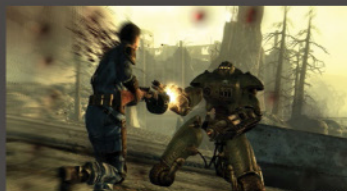




Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare 2007

Like *STALKER*, *Modern Warfare* is not a post-apocalyptic game, but it is equally fascinated by the mechanisms which might create one. The campaign's first act depicts a conflict wherein a US attempt to topple an oppressive dictator leads to the detonation of an atomic bomb. The second act takes us into the nuclear trauma of the past, with the game's signature mission taking place in the Ukrainian town of Pripyat, evacuated after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986.

Released in the same year, *Modern Warfare* makes for an intriguing companion piece to *Shadow of Chernobyl*, one that explores similar themes and ideas, sometimes even in the same spaces. But the tone is very different, all bombast and bravado. For *Modern Warfare*, its nuclear threats are either safely distanced or, like the weapons of mass destruction used to justify invading the Middle East, imagined fantasies, making them safe to deploy as popcorn entertainment.



Fallout 3 2008

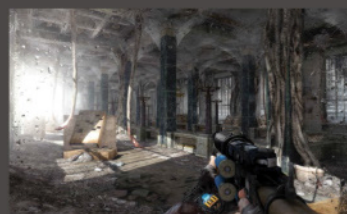
The quintessential nuclear post-apocalypse experience, *Fallout 3* took Interplay's iconic irradiated wasteland and put players smack in the middle of it, letting them explore the grey-green ruins of humanity. Combined with the sheer vastness of that world, *Fallout 3* came to represent the zenith of the post-apocalypse as escapist fantasy.

Emerging from the safe confines of your bombproof underground vault, the protagonist of *Fallout 3* is notionally on the trail of their missing father. Really though, *Fallout 3* is about the joy of poking around a world which hasn't been so much destroyed by nuclear fire as remade. It features most of what you'd expect from the original *Fallout* games, from kooky quests that can see you don the mantle of a wasteland superhero, to narrative choices like whether or not you blow up the town of Megaton with a nuke. *Fallout 3* loses some of the mechanical nuance of the original games, but the more accessible and engaging presentation makes that sacrifice worthwhile.

Metro 2033 2010

Of all the post-apocalypses featured on this list, the *Metro* series thinks hardest about how people might actually survive a nuclear onslaught. The game transforms Moscow's metro into a complex underground society, one that is impressively believable despite the game's structure as a decidedly linear shooter. Meanwhile, the brief moments when you venture outside brilliantly convey both the desolation and the danger left behind by thermonuclear bombs. The old world must be viewed through a gas mask at all times, while your character Artyom's breathing becomes increasingly laboured as the toxic air burns through the mask's replaceable filters.

The original game had some rough edges, but these were smoothed out by the *Redux* version released in 2014. Special mention should also be given to the sequel: *Last Light*, which uses the same premise to tell a superior story.



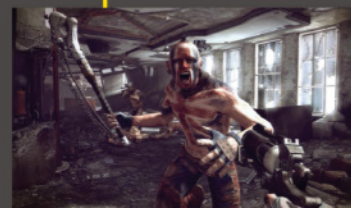
RADOMETER

Test your game's radiation levels with our handy Geiger counter



Fallout: New Vegas 2010

Fallout 3 may be the canonical sequel to *Fallout 2*, but *New Vegas* is the 1998 game's kindred spirit. Not only did *New Vegas* bring back a bunch of mechanics missing from *Fallout 3*, such as NPC companions and dynamic faction relationships, it also took many of its world and narrative beats from Interplay's 1998 sequel. *New Vegas* is inspired directly by *Fallout 2*'s New Reno, while the game also reintroduces factions like the New California Republic. It also shares *Fallout 2*'s unfortunate reputation for being buggy, though this is much less of a problem today.



Rage 2010

id Software's take on *Mad Max* isn't technically set in a nuclear wasteland – instead portraying the aftermath of an asteroid strike – but it might as well be. While the shooting was as entertaining as you'd expect, the hotly-touted vehicle combat put the 'bust' in 'combustion engine', and the story led precisely nowhere interesting, mainly because the game felt half-finished. The sequel, released a decade later, is a considerably better game, but ultimately arrived late to the open world party.

FEATURE

Post-apocalyptic gaming

Fallout 4 2015

Whereas *Fallout 3* was a bold new direction for the series, *Fallout 4* struggled to keep up with the times. It still had the breathtaking scope and wondrous sense of freedom you'd expect from a Bethesda game, but it also offered precious few new ideas over *Fallout 3*. What new ideas it did have, like base-building and settlement management, felt ill-suited to a game fundamentally about pushing toward the far reaches of the map.

Set 210 years after the war that devastated Earth, *Fallout 4* added a colourful flourish to the post-apocalypse that enhanced the juxtaposition between its ruined landscape and kitsch retrofuturism. It also features some of Bethesda's better supporting characters, such as the determined journalist Piper Wright, and everyone's favourite synthetic sleuth Nick Valentine.

VAULT DWELLER

Fallout's blue-and-yellow vault dweller suit has become synonymous with post-apocalyptic gaming.

DOGMEAT

Man's best friend or a flea-bitten nuisance?



Wasteland 2 2014

Fallout 3 may have been a fantastic game, but its transition to first-person, open-world exploration left a big isometric hole for the series' most committed fans. It's this hole which *Wasteland 2* promised to fill, a promise which carried it through a successful Kickstarter campaign.

Remarkably, *Wasteland 2* did fulfil that promise. Launched just over two years later, the sequel delivers a sweeping adventure through post-apocalyptic Arizona and California, with players creating their own squad of Desert Rangers and moulding them through a combination of chewy narrative choices and turn-based combat. Like the original *Wasteland*, the sequel was tough, uncompromising, and a little rough around the edges. But as a callback to the origins of post-apocalyptic RPGs, it did a fine job. The recently released *Wasteland 3* isn't half bad either.



Mad Max 2015

Mad Max had the misfortune of launching after *The Witcher 3* and *Metal Gear Solid V* raised the bar for open-world gaming, but Avalanche's post-apocalyptic tie-in was still a thoroughly entertaining take on the character. The story sees Max travelling around the wasteland to build the ultimate vehicular death machine, while squaring off against Immortan Joe's son Scabrous Scrotus.

And it's a fun adventure. The story is simple, but visually and mechanically this is an excellent *Mad Max* simulator. Avalanche's artists do a fantastic job of making the game's vast desert interesting, giving each region a distinctive look and punctuating the landscape with interesting landmarks. But the real treasure of *Mad Max* is its vehicle combat. Harpooning enemy vehicles before wrestling them off the road never ceases to be a joy.



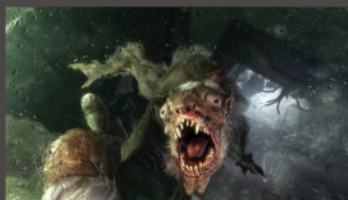
RED ROCKET DINER

Fallout 4 really upped the retrofuturism, making its world more vivid, but less grounded.

A GAME FUNDAMENTALLY ABOUT PUSHING TOWARD THE FAR REACHES OF THE MAP

Nuclear Throne 2015

Nuclear Throne offers a very different post-apocalypse from the other games I've discussed. There's no need for any existential hand-wringing here, because humanity is extinct from the outset. Instead, you play a mutant determined to ascend to the fabled nuclear throne by blasting their way through hordes of other mutants, splattering their twisted DNA across 15 procedurally generated levels of pure post-apocalyptic mayhem.



Metro Exodus 2019

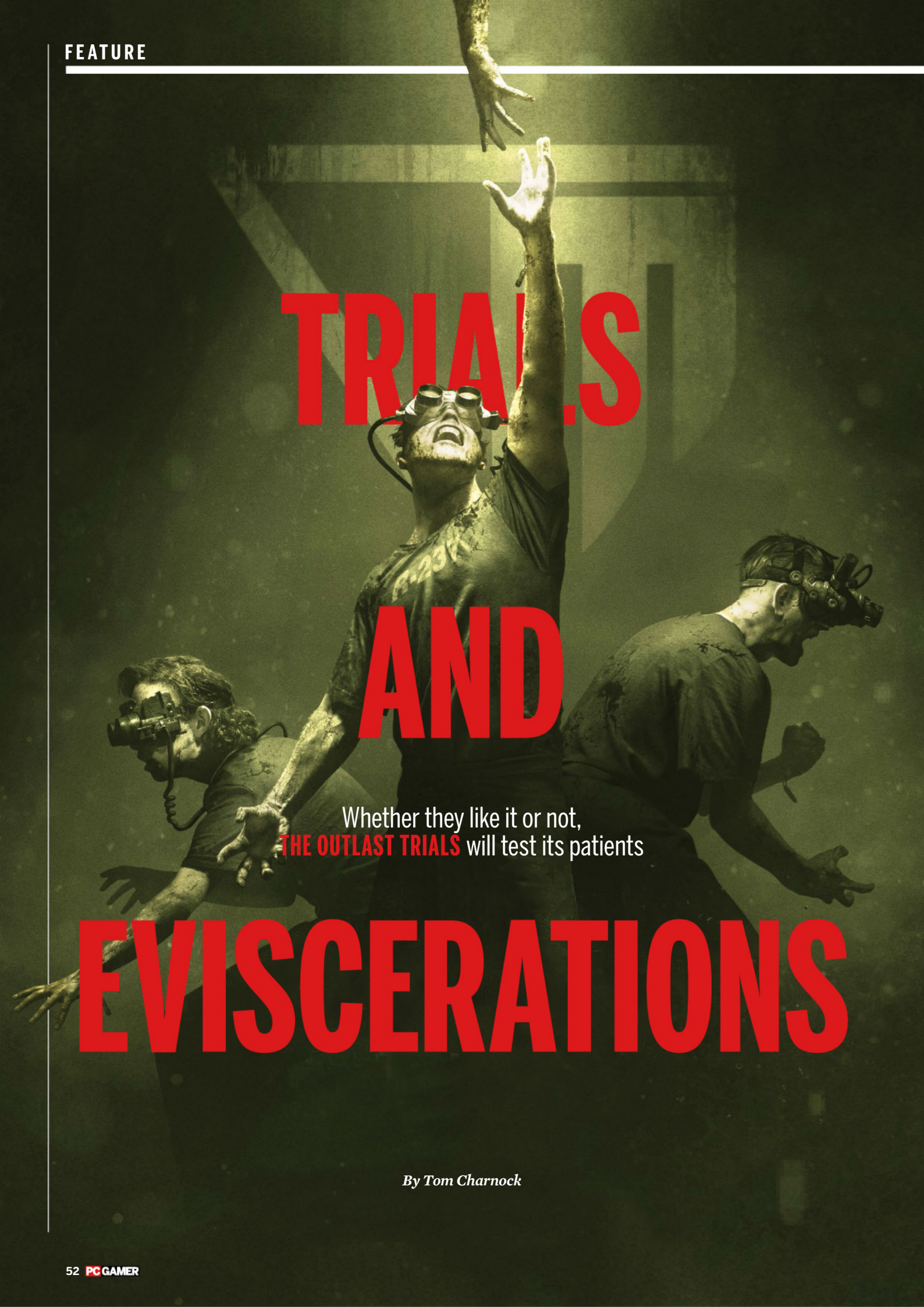
The most recent post-apocalyptic shooter from 4A Games paradoxically pulled players out of the Moscow metro, dispatching them on a grand railway journey. By far the studio's most ambitious game, Exodus neatly blends 4A's hallmark story-driven shooting with several miniature open worlds, ranging from a wintry floodplain to a scorching desert that was once the Caspian Sea. The structure gets increasingly linear as Exodus progresses. But if anything, this only brings added focus to what 4A does best. The final section is arguably the studio's finest work, a curtailed traditional Metro campaign that gives players a near-lethal dose of the series' haunting radioactive atmosphere.



Death Stranding 2019

All Hideo Kojima's games ruminate upon the threat of nuclear weapons. Death Stranding's post-apocalypse may not have been caused by nuclear weapons, but when a person is killed by one of Death Stranding's mysterious BTs, it triggers an event known as a voidout, akin to a nuclear explosion.

Death Stranding emphasises the value of life in the wake of a civilisation-ending disaster. Dying in Death Stranding brings with it the potential of another cataclysm, so every care must be taken to preserve life. This ties with Death Stranding's broader themes of reconstruction and reconnection, the notion that the end of the world is not the end, but the beginning of a new chapter.

A full-page background image showing three men in VR headsets and motion-capture suits. They are in a dark, industrial environment. One man in the center is reaching up towards a hand hanging from above. The other two men are in the foreground, one looking down and the other looking to the side. The scene is dimly lit with a greenish-yellow hue.

TRIALS

AND

Whether they like it or not,
THE OUTLAST TRIALS will test its patients

EVisCERATIONS

By Tom Charnock

During the height of the Cold War, in a world besieged by fear, the Murkoff Corporation finds its calling: kidnap test subjects, surgically implant night-vision goggles, and then let them loose inside a giant game of hide and seek. The prize is freedom, but the risk is either death... or insanity.

Canadian developer Red Barrels is no stranger to things that go bump in the night. 2013's *Outlast* and its 2017 sequel *Outlast II* were all about blending the fear of the unseen with the fear of being seen by whatever was lurking in the darkness. In a way, the similarities to a childhood game of hide and seek are quite clear – the not knowing if you'd been rumbled as you tried to stay quiet and motionless, even though you could see your pursuer inching closer to your hiding place.

Wrapped up in a heavy storyline involving the criminally insane, murderous cultists and MKUltra mind control experiments gone awry (not that they could go any other way), the *Outlast* games offered something of a unique horror experience in that they encouraged players to avoid confrontation and rely squarely on the flight component of the autonomic nervous system. Creeping through the unlit corridors of Mount Massive Asylum or among the cornfields and outbuildings of Coconino County with only the night-vision mode of your video camera to aid your investigation and escape, there was something truly primal about *Outlast*'s brand of survival/psychological horror that, while arguably reliant on many tropes of the genre, also made them some of the most intense games of their generation.

SOCK PUPPETS

If ever there was a real videogame homage to The Blair Witch Project, then surely *Outlast* and its sequel are it... minus the snotty crying into the camera lens, thankfully. Of course, there are other titles that follow this mould of 'tread quietly, and then peg it if something comes at you' (*Alien: Isolation* has entered the chat, quietly followed by Bloober Team's actual *Blair Witch* game), but *Outlast* set the standard. Now, in lieu of a proper *Outlast III* comes *The Outlast Trials*; Red Barrels' return to the world of the Murkoff Corporation, squatting under tables, night-vision, MKUltra, giant nurses holding bird-shaped sock puppets with drills in their mouths and hiding in the shadows as satanic policemen search for you while pleasuring themselves on their own sizzling cattle prods. Tasty.

Serving as a prequel of sorts to the other *Outlast* games, *The Outlast Trials* is set in 1959 during the height of the Cold War. The MKUltra experiments are very much in full swing and the Murkoff Corporation has developed a cunning plan: to kidnap denizens of the country and subject them to a series of torturous and grisly tests in an effort to reprogram their minds. Naturally, the best way to do this is considered to be via a series of bizarre 'trials' set in life-size reproductions of real-world locations filled with bloodthirsty and mutilated failed test subjects (known as Reagents), booby traps and hallucinogenic gases.

The whole game takes place inside Murkoff's secret Sinyala Facility, and each trial (the Early Access release features three distinct environments – a police station, a fairground and an orphanage) consists of a number of tasks that must be completed before you are either caught and killed by the failed Reagents roaming around; or you succumb to some other trap or

THE OUTLAST TRIALS IS FULLY GEARED TOWARDS ONLINE CO-OPERATIVE PLAY



psychosis brought on by inhaling said gas. These tasks range from finding and killing a police informant, to giving a bunch of murderous school kids a taste of their own medicine... inside a dentist-themed funfair ride. In a nutshell, this is *Saw* combined with the most warped escape room you've ever attempted. The final twist here though is that you do not have to enter this barbaric take on *The Crystal Maze* alone, as *The Outlast Trials* is fully geared towards online co-operative play.

HAUNTED HOUSES

Development of *The Outlast Trials* began in 2017, and from the outset the idea was always to take the series online. "We were always looking for something fresh. Even on *Outlast II*, we took the *Outlast* formula, and tried to adapt it to a more open environment with the cornfields," explains Red Barrels co-founder and *Outlast* senior designer Philippe Morin. "I would say probably by September 2017, we started thinking: what if we take you and your friends,

ABOVE: The first trial tasks you with transporting a police snitch to the electric chair.



and we drop you inside a haunted mansion, and you have to get out? Then that evolved into: OK, what if we took a bunch of friends, and dropped them into the asylum of the first *Outlast*, and we asked them to get out? So that was part of the initial idea: can we make this work?"

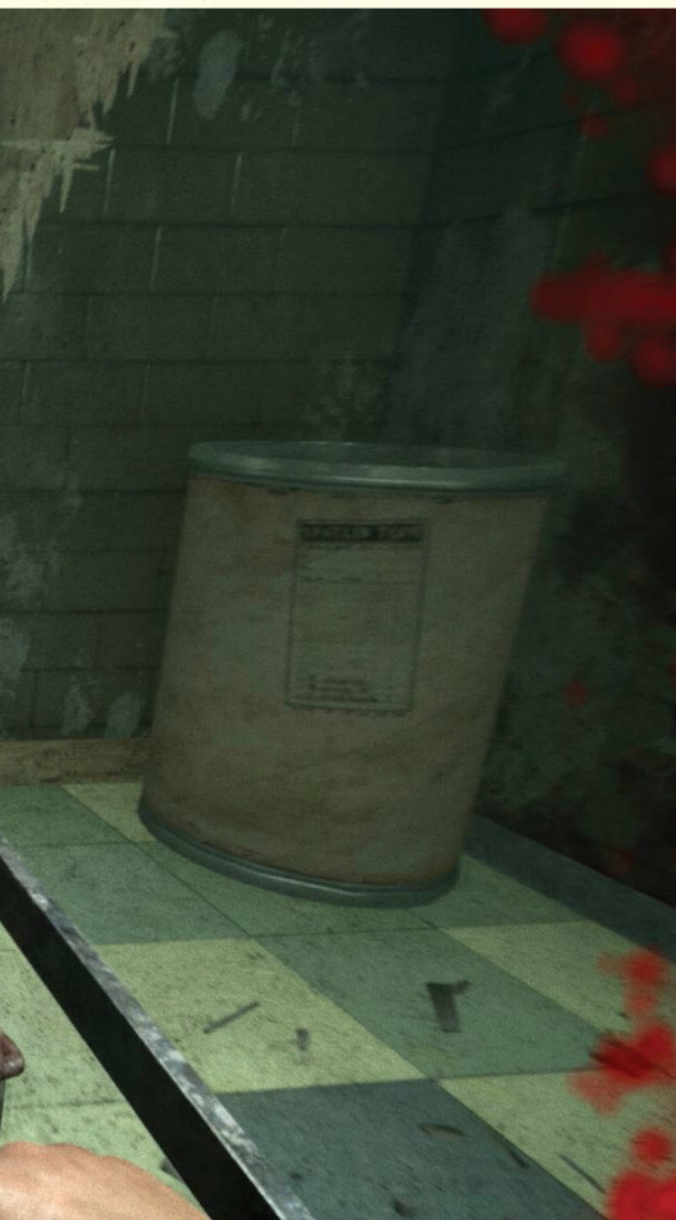
The way *The Outlast Trials* is set up will no doubt be familiar to those who play multiplayer on a regular basis. After an initial introduction where you are guided by a series of mannequins through a blood-spattered mansion, you are invited to destroy any references from the outside world to your personal and professional life. Once this task is complete, you are essentially the property of the Murkoff Corporation and become a resident of the Sinyala Facility, complete with your own customisable cell. From your cell, you are free to roam the facility, visiting upgrade shops and accessing the trials themselves via a terminal in the main atrium. It's here in this main atrium that the online nature of the game becomes more apparent, as

other players can invite you to join their team or you can simply go it alone into the trials.

"We didn't want to force players to be together. We were trying to evoke movies like *Saw* and *Cube*, we wanted that experience in which you decide: do we stick together? Do we spread out? We've been calling it a division of labour," Morin explains. "You know you have a bunch of tasks to complete, but how do you do those tasks? Do you all go to the same place together? Do you split up? Obviously because of all the dangers around, that have different implications."

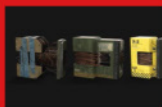
NIGHT MOVES

As everybody knows, splitting up in a horror movie is the worst choice you could possibly make, and while *The Outlast Trials* very much plays on tropes of the horror genre, it is the reliance on darkness as a shield that makes it stand out from the crowd. On the *Outlast* series' use of night-vision technology, Morin explains that it wasn't always the intended route for the latest entry in the



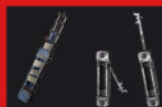
TOOLS OF THE TRIALS

Stealth isn't your only path to survival in The Outlast Trials...



BATTERIES

The night-vision goggles are vital for seeing in the dark, but they rely on batteries for power. Batteries come in various capacities, and it is wise to keep at least one in reserve.



LOCK-PICKS

Locked storage boxes and chests are abundant in *The Outlast Trials*, and they will require a lock-pick in order to activate the spinning minigame you need to defeat to get at the goodies inside.



MEDICINE

Like batteries, medicine bottles come in several sizes – small will replenish one health bar, while large will fully restore all your health. Until you activate the body-worn health rig, you'll be using these.



ANTIDOTE

A character called Skinner Man will appear and spray you with a hallucinogen, or you'll get a face full of gas via a booby trap. The antidote will stop the hallucinations and restore your sanity.

brainwashed cults, references to MKUltra and more meat-slicing equipment lying about than your local abattoir. But it isn't all about gruesome body horror when it comes to the scares. As Morin explains, the team put quite extensive research into the murky world of state-funded experimentation programs and the literature it spawned. "We work with a psychiatrist consultant, but they mostly helped us with the MKUltra and behaviour research. Mostly with the brainwashing methods and that process, because that's what helped us create the structure of the game, the trials, and what Murkoff want to do with those trials; how they want to break the self; they want to take a person, and make them confront all their fears, and have them deal with morality issues.

"At some point, the person becomes so confused that they just

empty themselves of any ideology. That's when you can just fill them in with whatever you want. That's what Murkoff is doing in the trials. They're putting people in a situation that is going to break them, so that when they come back, Murkoff becomes their friend, the ally."

Whether Murkoff truly becomes an ally will really rest in the hands of those who are brave enough to enter *The Outlast Trials* themselves, and take part in this most macabre game of hide and seek. Asked whether he partakes in said primal game of hunt or be hunted, Morin offers, "It's a game we all played when we were kids. I think the *Outlast* experience touches on that a bit. I live with my wife and two daughters, so I hide in the basement with my consoles and my guitars. So I guess you could say yes, I hide a lot, because I spend a lot of time in my basement." ■

franchise. "We tried a flashlight for a while. Because *The Outlast Trials* is set in 1959, we were not sure if we could sell the night-vision goggles. The reality is that they did exist. It's just that, back then, they were really big." Not everyone on the team was so enamoured with the idea of revisiting night vision though. "Every game we've done, we always go back to the drawing board. We evaluate what's part of the DNA. What can we change, and what can we not change? It was a pretty quick decision that night vision had to be in this game. Obviously, the camcorder did not exist back in 1959, so we had to figure out something else. It was funny for a while because one of the co-founders, Hugo Dallaire, was also the art director of the very first *Splinter Cell*. So he was like, "What, the goggles again?!" He can't escape the night-vision goggles!"

The themes covered in the *Outlast* series are intended to shock and scare the player, that much is pretty evident from the very nature of the premise. Psychiatric asylums,

BELOW: The use of lighting throughout is really quite impressive.



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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Hadouken!

Arguably, up until now the versus fighter genre has never really been truly at home on PC, despite many major fighting game series being released for it at some point or other over the past 30 years.

Part of that uneasy fit came down to bad and often delayed ports of arcade or console fighting games, while limited controller and multiplayer options also

absolutely haven't helped

PC gamers get in the versus fighter ring.

With *Street Fighter 6*, though, Capcom has seemingly removed all these barriers, with a simultaneous, cross-play release offering the full package to PC gamers on day one. Mouse and keyboard still won't cut it, sure, but grab a PC-compatible joystick or arcade stick, and it's time to kick some console gamer ass!

R. Jones

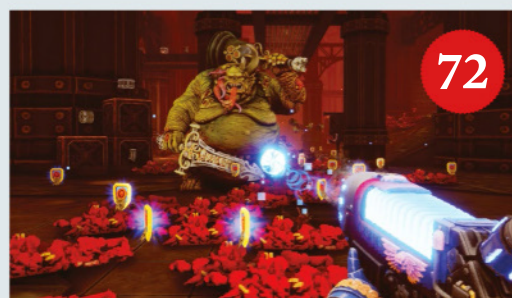
ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's God-Emperor serving reviewers...



NOAH SMITH

Specialist in
Rendering ork flesh

Currently playing
WH40K: Boltgun

This month
Realised that in the grim darkness of the far future there is only war. And mocha lattes!



JOSHUA WOLENS

Specialist in
Battling rogue AI

Currently playing
System Shock

This month
Went to McDonald's drive-thru, but didn't get on with a new AI server named Shodan.



ANDREA SHEARON

Specialist in
Stone Age farming

Currently playing
Roots of Pacha

This month
Realised that farming was less stressful than hunting wild boars.

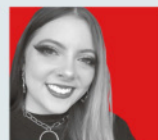


LAUREN AITKEN

Specialist in
Vulkan Mind-Melds

Currently playing
Star Trek: Resurgence

This month
Drank far too much Romulan ale with Spock, then sang bawdy space shanties.

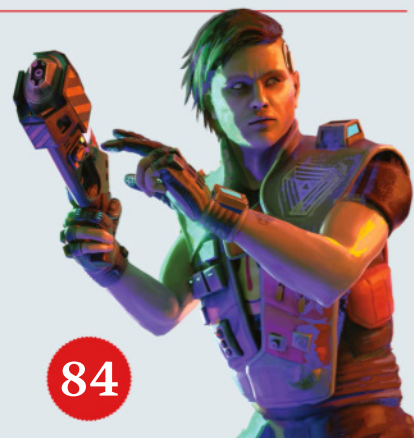


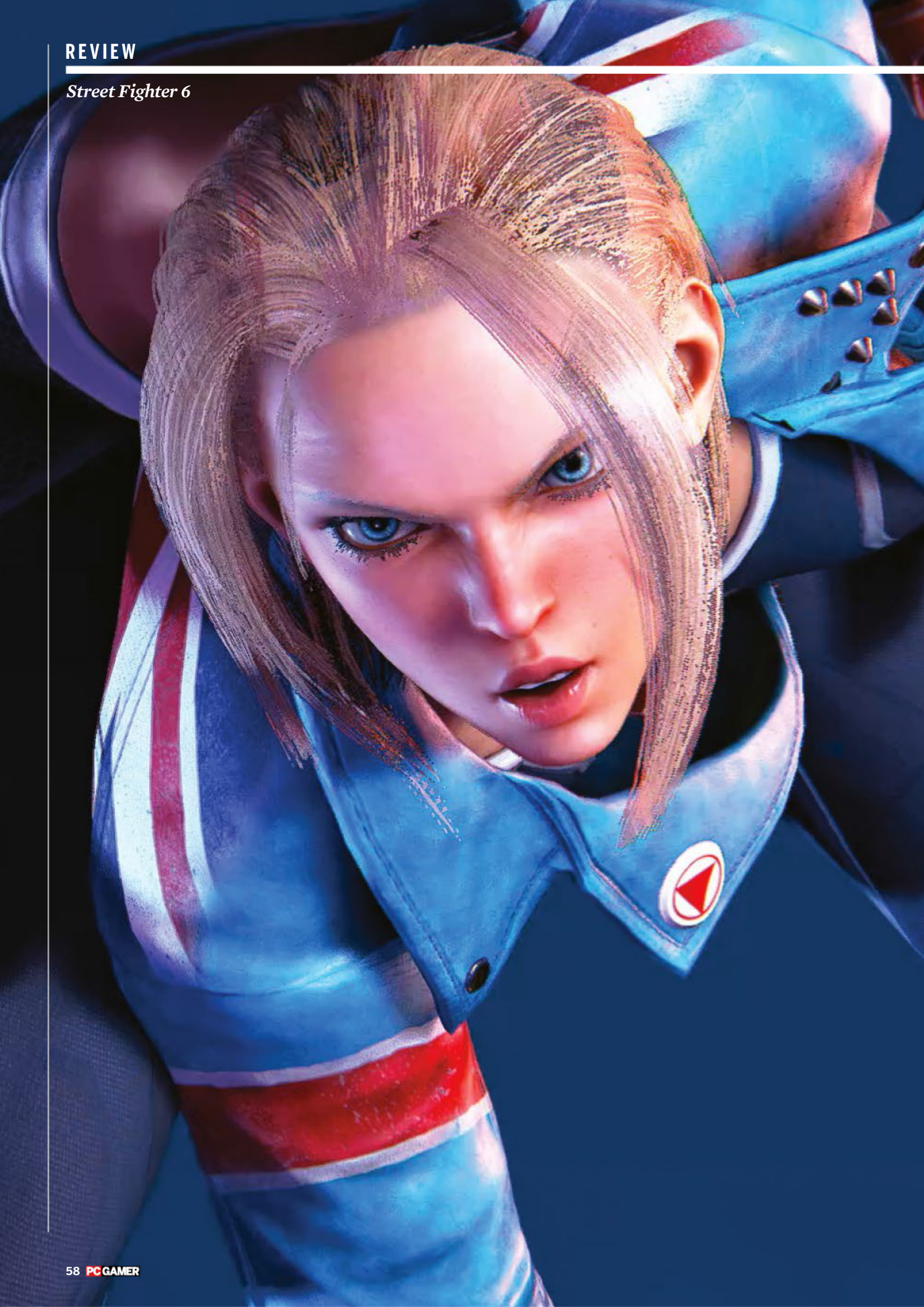
MOLLIE TAYLOR

Specialist in
Styling Guile's flattop

Currently playing
Street Fighter 6

This month
Brutally pummelled a guy called Luke until he cried. Also, played *Street Fighter 6*.





PERFECT KO

STREET FIGHTER 6 is Capcom fighting at its finest

By Mollie Taylor

I gotta be honest, I've bounced off 2D fighters. I'm a 3D fighter girl at heart, and losing a dimension seriously messes with my head. What do you mean I can't sidestep? I gotta jump around? Unheard of. I've been determined to finally push past my fear of only having deux dimensions with *Street Fighter 6* though, and by god does Capcom do a fantastic job of welcoming me inside, making me a nice cup of tea and patting me on the back just for showing up and trying.

It's a far cry from the much-maligned launch of *Street Fighter V*, a grave error that's lingered around Capcom like a questionable fart for the last seven years. The developer slowly amended its mistakes, but it's determined not to repeat them this time around. It's succeeded: *Street Fighter 6* is a bombastic, colourful, all-out package that is ready to cater to every playstyle and skill level, doing it with a degree of finesse that has well and truly set the bar high for the next generation of fighting games.

HIT THE STREETS

It's hard not to fall in love with *Street Fighter 6*, for how much it offers and how easy it is to jump straight into any of its modes. I decided to start with World Tour, its singleplayer mode that blends its core fighting gameplay with an open-ish RPG world, levelling system and story.

Fighting games have never been known for their thrilling singleplayer modes (unless you're *Mortal Kombat*), but World Tour is a pleasure to play through. Instead of playing as one of the game's classic fighters, I'm given the freedom to create my own abomination of an avatar. The character creator is seriously robust, with a staggering number of sliders and options to tweak. Want gigantic forearms and twig-like biceps? *Street Fighter 6* has got your back. Want to look like a cat when it's standing on its hind legs? You can do that, too. I'm boring and opt for an approximation of my *Final Fantasy XIV* character, just with

more muscles and a bigger dump truck. Things like limb length and body size actually factor into my ability to dish out and take damage, too, something I have to keep in mind when designing my beefcake OC.

I could unlock more moves by playing with each fighter's style

I'm then plonked down in the brightly saturated Metro City – yep, the one from Capcom's beat-'em-up series *Final Fight* – as a brand-new student studying under

sorta-newcomer, sorta-not-newcomer Luke. I'm gifted a portion of his moveset and sent on my merry way to find more fighters, travel the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A colourful explosion of sweaty, veiny 2D muscle-bound warriors

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 2700X,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
streetfighter.com/6

world, unravel a mystery and instigate a fight with almost any citizen I come across. As I meet more of *Street Fighter 6*'s cast, like the thick-thighed Chun-Li or hulking muscular warrior Marisa, I can enrol under their fighting style and pick up little chunks of their moveset, too.

AROUND THE WORLD

I switch between 'Masters', which grants me that fighter's normals and combos, but can mix in special and super moves I've picked up from other members of the roster, like throwing in Manon's command grab and Dhalsim's slippery teleport. I had far too much fun Frankensteining my own moveset, seeing just how goofy or weirdly optimised I could make my combo of different fighting styles. I could unlock even more moves by playing with each fighter's style and levelling it up, as well as plying each character with gifts picked up from merchants and beefing with random pedestrians and police officers. I can even take the moves and use them as platforming tools, like using Chun-Li's Spinning Bird Kick to levitate across two platforms, Luke's Rising Uppercut to throw myself up a ledge or Blanka's Electric Thunder to shock open barrels and crates for loot.

World Tour is also rather cleverly disguised as a great mode to teach core fundamentals. Numerous side missions focus on putting the game's various mechanics into practice – like hitting drive parries, triggering pressure time and performing hard knockdowns – exploring defensive play and ways to find openings in my opponent's offence. It was a great way of subtly sneaking in how *Street Fighter 6*'s numerous mechanics work, when best to use them and just reminding me that they existed in the first place.

There are even part-time jobs, minigames that give me currency for outfitting my avatar or buying gifts for my pals, but again masquerade as fun ways to teach fighting game

A NEW CHALLENGER!

Meet the fresh faces



KIMBERLY

A spunky ninja who loves a throwback and is hell smart and strong to boot!



JP

A menacing businessman with two faces and a psycho power trick up his sleeve.



MARISA

269lbs of pure Italian power, with a love for jewellery and equally strong allies.



MANON

A strong and graceful supermodel-slash-judoka with a hint of French snobbery.



JAMIE

A luscious-haired breakdancing drunken boxer who takes the 'drunken' part too seriously.



LILY

Lover of nature and a young girl who is part of the Thunderfoot tribe.

Street Fighter 6

fundies. I'm too embarrassed to admit how much of my playtime was spent on Hado-Pizza, a minigame dedicated to practicing input execution. Other minigames focus on spacing and footsies, or dealing big damage and combos all at once.

My biggest gripe is that, for how well-optimised every other part of *Street Fighter 6* is, World Tour is a bit of a chugfest. It's especially prevalent in the mode's two large and open locations. I frequently suffered frame drops while running around, and fights would slow the whole game down considerably, causing my character to float around the screen in slow motion. Turning on shader precaching in the settings helped with my open world traversal, but I still regularly suffered from battle slowdown. It made the moments where everything was running fine – usually in its smaller areas designed around the game's stages – feel abnormally fast and tripped me up.

It's a bummer because World Tour is a surprisingly enthralling fighter-slash-RPG hybrid outside of its technical issues. I spent around 60% of my 50-hour playthrough there, and while the performance issues didn't completely ruin my time with the mode, they certainly hampered it.

MODERN TIMES

I played through the majority of World Tour with *Street Fighter*'s new Modern controls, a more streamlined version of its Classic control scheme. It takes the six-button input down to

just four face buttons, simplifying special moves and adding the ability to string together auto combos with one button. It's a relatively simple control type on the surface, but contains a surprising amount of depth with the option to manually input certain moves. It's a great starting point for those who are

unfamiliar or easily overwhelmed by *Street Fighter*'s traditional inputs, and makes up for its increased simplicity by reducing damage on specials and providing suboptimal combo routes.

Personally, I see Modern controls as a great way to introduce people to fighting games. Classic control users will still be able to best less skilled players relying on Modern, and those who decide to stick around will inevitably upgrade to the full-blown Classic control scheme eventually.

Modern controls also served as a way to help me get to grips with some of the more complex characters, like sinister zoner JP. He's one of my favourite fighting game newcomers in a while, but his high level of technicality was an instant roadblock. Being able to quickly pick him up and get a feel for him in Modern controls made me want to explore his movelist further in Classic, something I think will be the case for many others.

That's mostly what I did, too. I tinkered around a lot with Chun-Li, Marisa and Kimberly's movesets during my time with World Tour, and I was desperate to learn more about what they do, and which of their

moves are most useful. That's when I moved to Fighting Ground, which houses most of *Street Fighter 6*'s offline modes: Arcade, tutorials, versus mode and team battles.

PLUS ON BLOCK

With most of the game's lore and story tucked away in World Tour, Arcade mode is incredibly simple. Small cutscenes play at either end of each character's story, though it does feature some gorgeous art – with more unlockable through playing stories multiple times. I loved Versus mode's hyped-up music and short introduction that has characters walking through a crowd, striking a pose while their likes and dislikes flash up on screen. There's also the option to turn on commentary, with FGC powerhouses like Tasty Steve and James Chen hopping on comms to try and bring the thrilling tournament action from the stage to the couch.

Unfortunately, the commentary gets repetitive. Hearing, "Wow, what a decision!" for the thousandth time made me question my sanity at one point. It was never going to imitate live hyped-up commentary perfectly, but it does feel rather stagnant when I'm wailing on CPUs. However, I did find it surprisingly useful for getting a read on what I was doing right and wrong in the moment. That instant feedback isn't something you usually get out of these games, and so surprisingly, the fake commentary is actually useful.

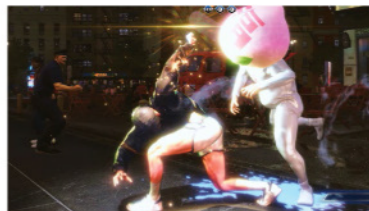
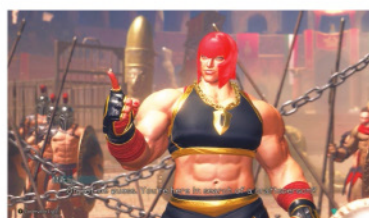
Where *Street Fighter 6*'s offline options truly shine is in its practice modes. This is a game that wants newbies to learn in a way that's easy to understand and put into practice. Character guides give a rough overview of what everyone can do and the best tools to use in certain situations. I learn about how to keep my opponent on their toes with Dee Jay's feints, and the best way to utilise Kimberly's spray can grenades. It's not always easy to immediately gauge when moves are useful just from staring at a movelist, which makes the character guides a fantastic beginning point. Combo trials are easy to understand, too, broken up into three difficulties with separate lists for each control scheme. That said, sometimes it would tell me I could throw out any punch or kick when, actually, it wanted a specific type for that

I frequently suffered frame drops while running around

A NEW DIMENSION

A 3D fighter-coded brain's journey in accepting 2D

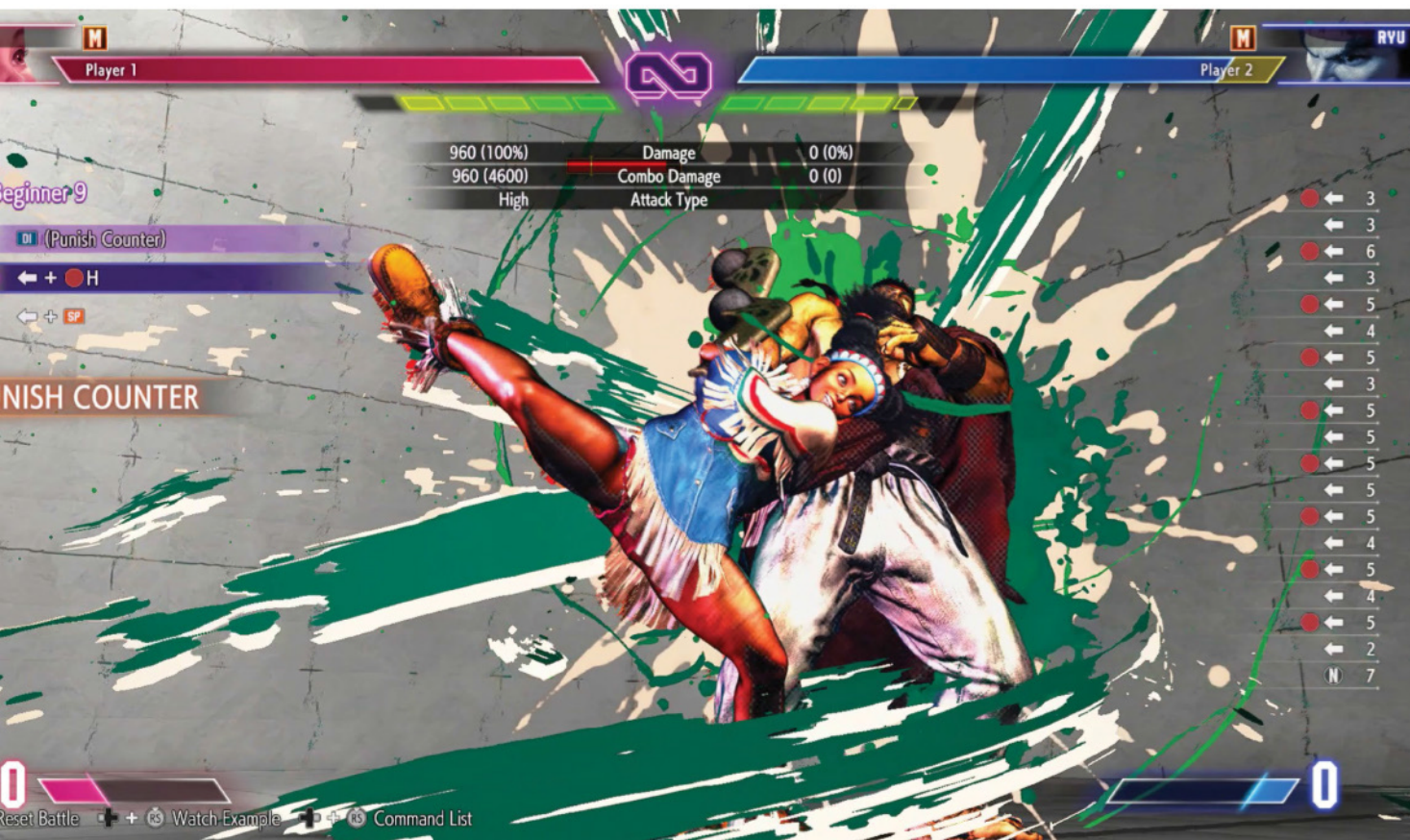




FAR LEFT: Level 3 supers are worth it just to see each character's comical facial expressions.

LEFT: World Tour's story has you rubbing shoulders with *Street Fighter 6*'s cast in a variety of ways.

BELOW: Trying out Combo Trials is a great way to get used to *Street Fighter 6*'s input flow.

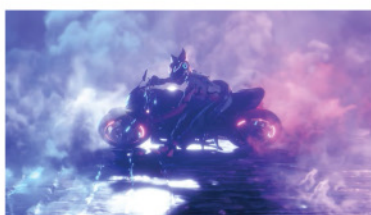




RIGHT: Juri's giving some big K/DA vibes in this game. *League of Legends* collab, anyone?

FAR RIGHT: Probably the first time I've been told that as a compliment.

BELOW: Drive Impacts explode in colour as characters throw them out, making for kaleidoscopic trades.



combo, which led to the occasional frustrating roadblock.

Otherwise, it's the best, most in-depth training mode I've seen in a fighting game. Everything you could want is right there – frame data, timing display, a virtual controller to watch your inputs. You can tweak and record your training dummy for any setup you might want to practice, or train fundamentals on one of the very useful presets. Whiff punishing, throw escapes, anti-airs and combos can be instantly labbed without having to waste time manually setting up the training dummy to do what you like, and it feels great. Everything you could want in a training mode is here, and I'll no doubt be spending hours toiling away in the lab once this review is done.

IN THE LAB

I took the skills I learned during my time with World Tour and Fighting Ground and hopped into online, which was available to reviewers for a few days. I roped in fellow PCG writer Wes Fenlon to get stuck into some games with me. I'm based in the UK, with Wes all the way in the USA, so this would put *Street Fighter 6*'s netcode to the test. Wes was avatarless, so we skirted the Battle Hub and went to the online modes straight from Fighting Ground to create a custom room.

The online mode in *Street Fighter 6* is amazing, and one of the smoothest online experiences I've had in a fighting game for a hot sec. Creating a custom room and inviting Wes was easy, only requiring his Capcom ID or username to add him as a friend and shoot him an invite. Custom rooms can house up to 16 players at once, with four separate rooms that they can jump into. Rooms can be set to be versus battles or training, with the option to spectate,

Everything about online play is fast and smooth. My games with Wes ran at around 190ms ping but were still responsive, with no pesky syncing stalls or frame rewinds getting in the way of our matches. Rematches were near-instant too – in most games, I'm guilty of reaching for my phone or quickly tabbing out

while waiting for the next game to begin, but there's no time for any of that in *Street Fighter 6*.

When Wes finally concocted his terrifying avatar, we jumped over to the Battle Hub to play online in a more traditional way: carting our avatars down to arcade cabinets, sitting down either side of each other and playing it out.

While the Hub was pretty quiet during the review period, never really exceeding ten people, I also checked it out during the game's closed and open betas and found a bustling, lively area. It was super neat to see people huddled around cabs, their spectating avatars cheering the match on. I was even able to use my avatar to square up to Wes', with all my stats and my movelist from World Tour carrying over to the special online mode. It's a novelty, but I'm looking forward to seeing all the gremlin creations beefing with each other in the middle of the lobby.

Street Fighter 6 also features a rotation of classic Capcom games that can be played in the Battle Hub, as well as extreme battles that implement random conditions for each battle. There's a great amount of variety for online outside of your standard ranked and casual matches, and I'm looking forward to seeing

just how lively the hubs become with the full launch.

INSERT CREDIT

While the servers were online, I was also able to poke around the menus and found some incredibly side-eyeable options. Bad news: *Street Fighter 6* has a battle pass. I'm an avid disliker of battle passes, especially in games where they're completely and utterly unnecessary. Like this one! Capcom promises that avatar gear will only be cosmetic and offer no stat increases, but it feels like a wholly unnecessary addition to the game nonetheless.

There's also the return of premium currency, this time called Fighter Coins. They were included alongside Drive Tickets, which appear to be earned through completing challenges in-game rather than bought with real money. Fighter Coins will require opening your wallet though. I know it's a necessary evil these days, but in a game that's already \$60 minimum, it's a huge downside.

Monetisation aside, I'm picking up what *Street Fighter 6* is putting down. I've never felt this way about a 2D fighter before. It's handed me all the tools I could need to learn its strange combo flows and timings, and has actively encouraged me to put them into practice in a slew of different ways. If I don't love hanging out in the training room, I can go and practice with World Tour side missions or jump into some online training with a pal. If I want to goof around and smack my friends with my OC, I can do that, too.

Capcom has offered a buffet of ways to play *Street Fighter 6*, and there'll be something at the table everyone likes. If you've ever been too scared to try a fighting game for the first time, make *Street Fighter 6* your entry point into the genre. It's the most accessible entry yet, and I can't wait to see how many more people enter the FGC through this. I couldn't think of a better way to kickstart the new gen of fighting games – other fighters like *Tekken 8* and *Mortal Kombat 1* have a lot to live up to. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Street Fighter 6 is the best fighting game of the last decade. It is perfect for newcomers and veterans alike.

89

Everything you could want in a training mode is here

REFRIGERAIDER

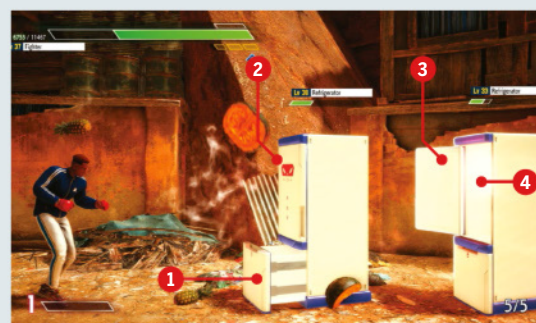
Face to face with Metro City's deadliest foe

1 DRAWER OF DEATH

Takes 'fruit punch' to a whole new level with sweet produce being flung your way.

2 DEATH-STARE DOOR

Whoever made this appliance even put a face on it so you can see just how mad it is.

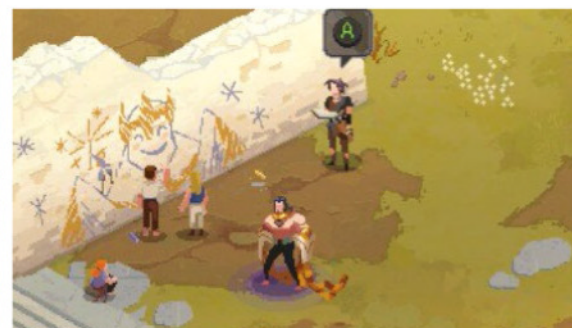
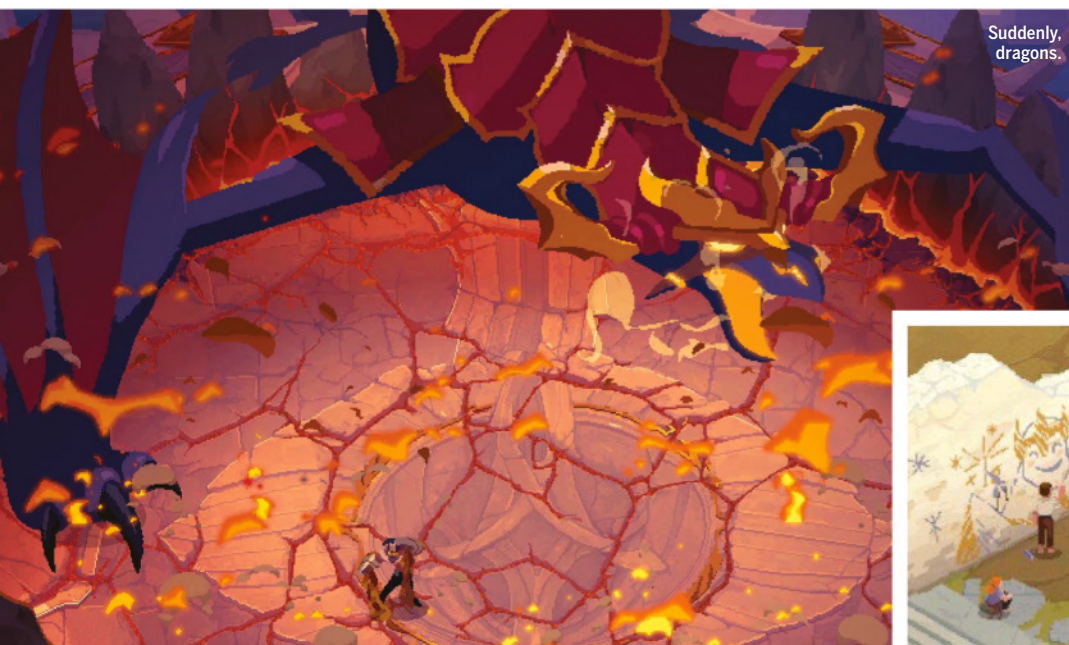


3 FIGHTING FLAP

If an electronic death stare wasn't enough, how about having a door swung onto your face?

4 STONE COLD

Good luck figuring out this guy's defence. You can hit it, but you probably won't hurt it.



RIGHT: No worries, I'll come to you.

FAR RIGHT: Peace was never an option.



MAGES IN REVOLT

In **THE MAGESEEKER**, 'no justice' means 'no peace'

By Kaile Hultner

Different people may have different reasons for revolting, but the most common reason they do it is because social conditions have become unlivable. Some event has occurred or policy has been enacted that goes beyond what's bearable and into a territory where compromise is not possible. It's at this point society can no longer be reformed; the new world will emerge from the ashes of the old... in Runeterra. Definitely just in Runeterra.

The Mageseeker: A League of Legends Story, developed by Digital Sun and published by Riot Forge, Riot Games' worldbuilding-centric publishing wing, is the origin story of Sylas the Unshackled, a LoL melee burst/skirmisher champion added in early 2019. Depending on who in the player base you ask, Sylas is either an especially edgy anti-hero or a straight-up villain, a revolutionary figure or a murderer; there doesn't really seem to be any in-between. *The Mageseeker* aims to set the record straight.

We first meet Sylas after a short synopsis of his origins in the Kingdom of Demacia. He was conscripted into the anti-magic secret police, the titular Mageseekers, as a child because he had the ability to visually identify other people's magical auras. When one of his latent magic powers flared up on a mission and he accidentally killed some villagers, he was locked in a high-security dungeon for 15 years, with nothing to keep him company but some questionable books and a mind and body bent on revenge.

Cut to present day: there's a revolt happening in Demacia against the Mageseekers. A freshly escaped Sylas is directed to a secluded rebel camp in a nearby forest, and from there we're left with a choice: do we seek the revenge Sylas so badly wants, or do we help the rebels build up revolutionary power?

The gameplay systems that prop this political drama up are fairly robust, from the complex, element-based combat that incorporates both

magic and melee attacks to the way the game introduces other mages as fighters in their own right. In addition to your normal and heavy attacks, Sylas' chain gauntlets allow him to close the distance on enemies, steal enemy magic and even toss himself across the map for safety. Before each mission, you also get the opportunity to choose two elite mages to back you up and

recruit freed prisoners, and you're able to use a rotating roster of special combos on enemies as you see fit. From here, the combat system

Sylas' chain gauntlets allow him to close the distance on enemies

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *League of Legends* story that shares a conceit with Limp Bizkit's Break Stuff

EXPECT TO PAY
£24

DEVELOPER
Digital Sun

PUBLISHER
Riot Forge

REVIEWED ON
AMD Aethir 0405,
16GB RAM,
AMD Van Gogh 0405
(Steam Deck 256GB)

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
themageseeker.com

evolves even further, eventually letting Sylas use many of the same powers he has in LoL itself. Enemies, especially bosses, can be brutal if you're not paying attention, but the checkpointing is fair, resulting in an action experience that doesn't wear out its welcome.

GOOD STORY

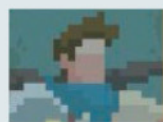
I've never really gotten into *League of Legends* or its various spin-offs, but refreshingly I didn't need a doctorate in *Runeterra* lore to understand *The Mageseeker's* story – and I was impressed by how frank it is with its surprisingly radical narrative.

There's no waffling here: the Demacian state is evil for imprisoning and killing mages, and it needs to be dismantled. A diverse cast of supporting characters disagree with Sylas on motives and tactics throughout the roughly 12-hour story mode, but if you're looking for some kind of centrist 'pox on both houses' which confirms Sylas' position as a villain or something, you won't get it. Sylas, far from being evil himself, never directs his rage toward random citizens. He doesn't terrorise random villages or slaughter indiscriminately. To butcher a common phrase, he only afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted.

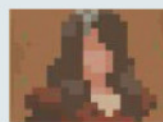
While *The Mageseeker* can feel a bit didactic at times, its willingness to stake a clear ideological claim when so many of its contemporaries shrink like violets at the mention of politics is refreshing. It backs this up with compelling gameplay, an excellent soundtrack and vibrant pixel graphics. If you like media that combines high-octane action and bombastic political intrigue, *The Mageseeker* is well worth the time. ■

BEST PALS

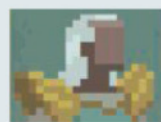
The six friends you'll meet in the revolution



LORNE
Big 'ideas guy'. Loves to talk and be heard at meetings. Always late for battle, though.



NIA
Does most of the actual tactical groundwork after Lorne stops grandstanding.



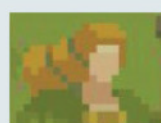
OBERON
Likes to come up with tricks and traps to sabotage the enemy in their spare time.



ELARA
Keeps to herself, but always pitches in for chores around camp. Terrifying on the battlefield.



DUCARD
Thinks he's a bard. Only knows Wonderwall. As such, not as popular as he thinks he is.



VESPER
Crunchy-verging-on-crusty, she knows the most about natural medicines that can cure you.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A revolutionary tale told with memorable characters, excellent combat, and surprisingly forthright politics.

89

JABBERWONKY

RAVENLOK is an interpretation of Alice in Wonderland, but its qualities run skin deep

By Dominic Tarason

At least aesthetically, *Ravenlok* makes a great first impression with a beautifully lit farmstead backdrop, populated by detailed (but still pleasantly chunky) voxel people. A girl sits in the shade of a tree, playing with her dog. It asks you for the girl's name, and what accessory her faithful pooch will be wearing. And then the fetch quests start, and will continue until the moment the credits roll.

It feels like an unfortunate statement of intent that despite being a hack and slash action game, *Ravenlok* begins its ersatz Alice in Wonderland adventure with legwork, bouncing between two small (but beautifully detailed) scenes, talking with just two unmoving NPCs (the young heroine's parents) and collecting a series of items for them when – and only when – requested. The items remaining stubbornly glued to the ground until such time as your quest log demands they be taken; a rule that remains in effect through the entire game.

It's not long before the fetch questing leads the girl (minus her dog, which is never seen or mentioned again) into Dunia, a magical realm of classily-dressed rabbits, Tweedles (of both dum and dee varieties) and a villainous queen with an army of surly playing cards. Despite some oddly-named bespoke creatures, and the heroine being known as Ravenlok due to her black hair, it's a familiar, cosy Wonderland with a few playful twists, such as most of the rabbits having four arms and the Red Queen also being the Caterpillar for reasons unexplained.

Familiar as its inspirations are, it is an absolute treat to see. *Ravenlok* is a pseudo-retro aesthetic triumph. Every environment is packed with detail rendered in unfiltered textures, packed full of voxelised decoration and lit impeccably. It runs silky smooth, and I didn't encounter any technical issues at all, but that's perhaps because of *Ravenlok*'s limited ambition. These picture-perfect

scenes are all the easier to appreciate as they're always viewed from the perfect angle, in part because you can only pivot the camera a few degrees in each direction. It gives these

environments the feel of a diorama or a voxelised stage play. It feels like a world meant to be observed and appreciated from afar, not played with.

Until around half an hour in, *Ravenlok* is nothing but fetching

objects for stationary characters, including having to rustle up your sword and shield. By the time the game introduces combat (after yet

Nothing but fetching objects for stationary characters

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A hack and slash action adventure inspired by Alice in Wonderland

EXPECT TO PAY
£19.80

DEVELOPER
Cococucumber

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-9900k, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce 2080Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
cococucumber.co

another fetch quest to locate a sword and shield), I couldn't help but feel the game creaking a little. Then the combat tutorial begins, fading to black to relocate the player to a flatter, more open, less detailed version of the area designed entirely for fighting. This trick is only sometimes used, with some of the explorable areas having enemies to whack, but it happens often enough to feel like Cococucumber never quite figured out how to make the action mesh with the low-key exploration. It also doesn't help that the combat is almost upsettingly one-note.

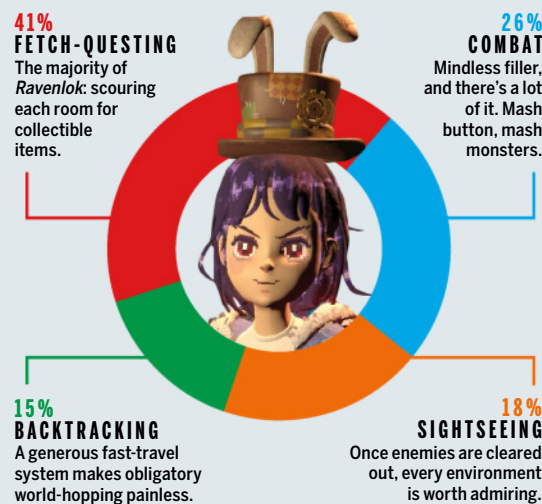
SNICKER-SNACK

Simple, one-note combat isn't inherently a bad thing, so long as that note is a pleasant one. Mashing my way through a *Dynasty Warriors* game or even a *Lego Star Wars* here and there can be a joy, and I am a huge fan of the Ys series. Unfortunately, the note I heard most through *Ravenlok*'s entire length is a sharp, artificial impact noise used for every possible combat interaction. From breaking pottery to cutting plant monsters and even shattering the arbitrary crystal MacGuffins at the end of each world, everything makes the same tinny, slightly distorted 'tink' sound that drowns out the music and most higher thought, and there's nothing much more to do. There's no jump button, no combos, just a 'swing sword' button.

Regrettably, almost all of *Ravenlok*'s combat involves little more than facing an enemy and rapidly mashing the attack button to stunlock them into oblivion. Sometimes hitting a dozen times or more per foe, that's a lot of the same note, and punctuated with very little else. There's a block button that seemed of very little use, a dodge button for evading telegraphed boss attacks, but against rank-and-file monsters there's nothing deeper to do than mash 'attack' as fast as you can. Once enemies get too spongy,

NEVERMORE?

Ravenlok is relatively short. Here's how my time with it broke down



The first of many bosses. Get your mashin' finger ready.

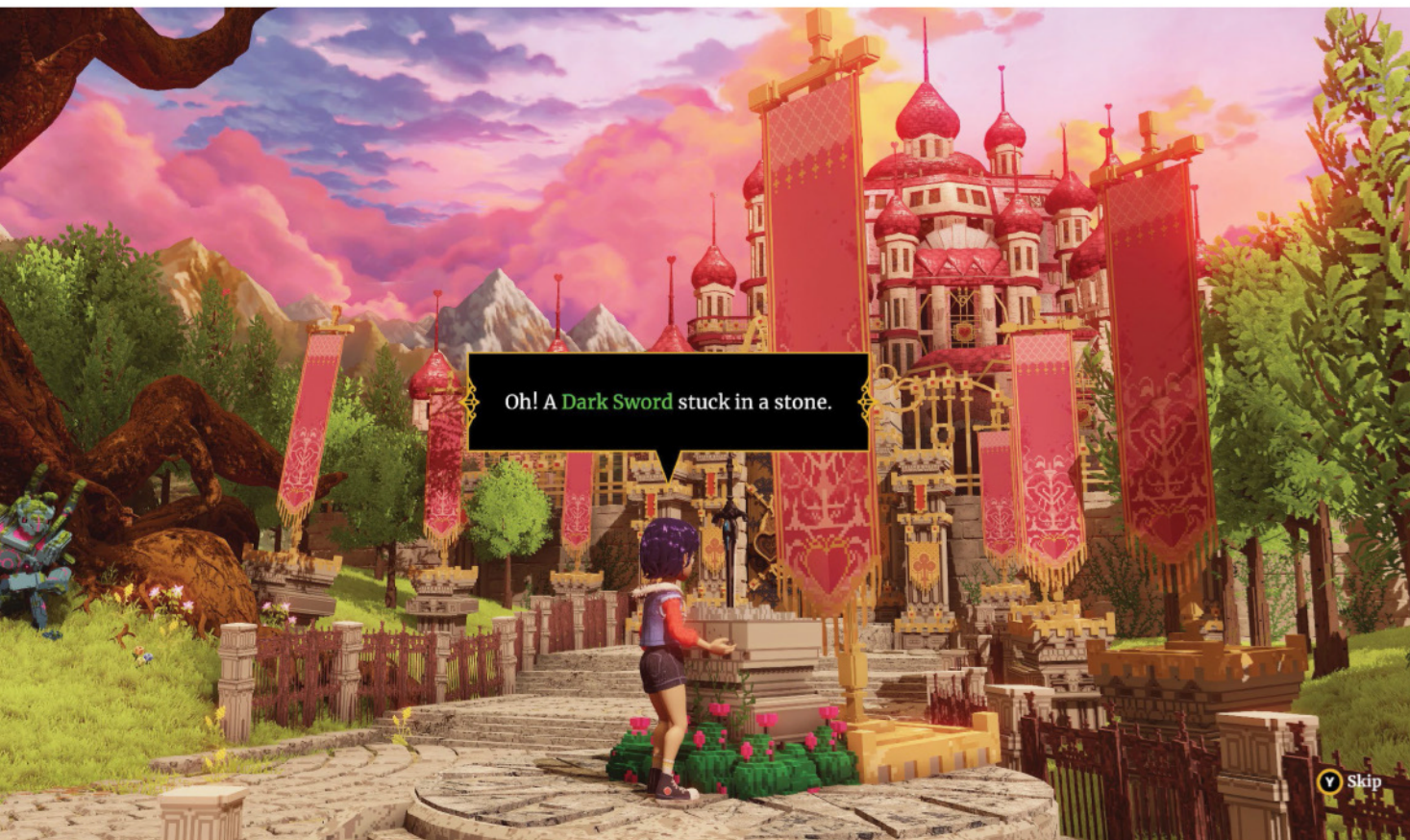


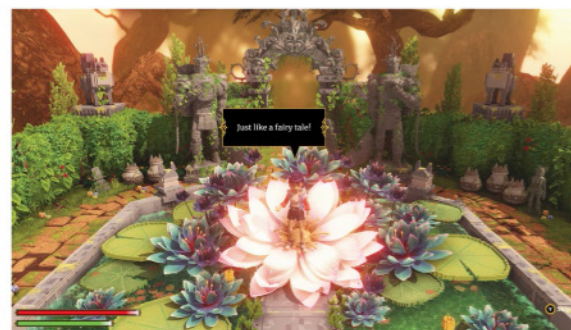
FAR LEFT: The combat realm: where maybe 50% of combat arbitrarily happens.

LEFT: The labyrinth courtyard: one of the prettiest scenes in *Ravenlok*.



BELOW: This seems ominous, but nothing bad happens in this game.

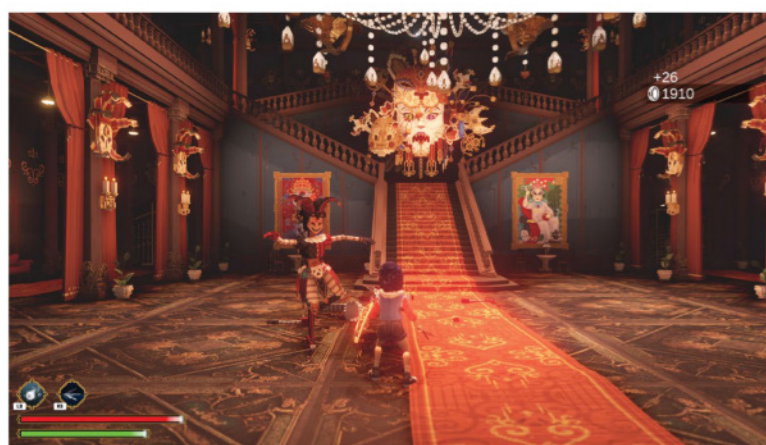
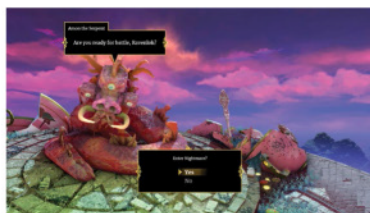




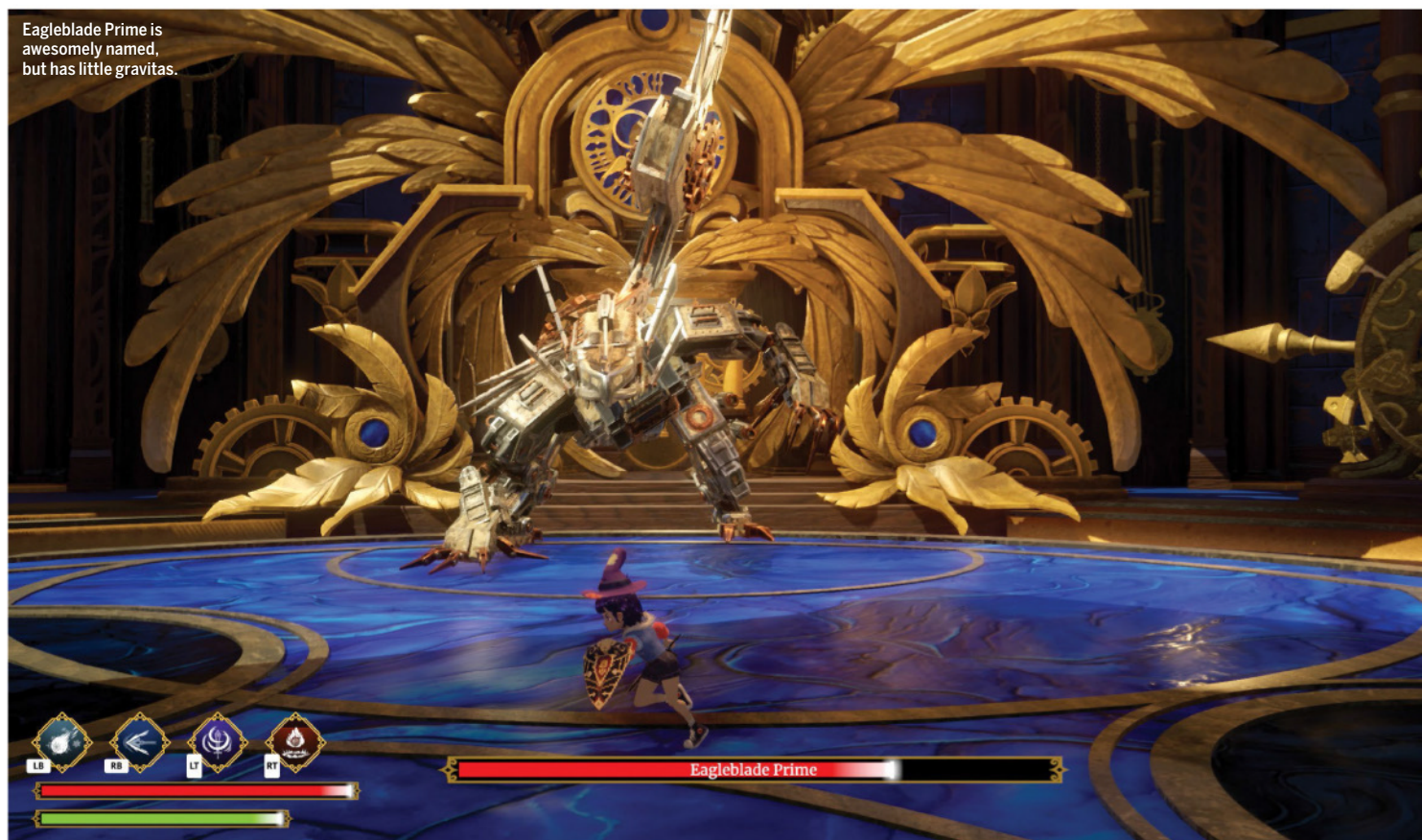
ABOVE: Before Wonderland Dunia comes fetch quests. And after, too.

RIGHT: *RavenloK*'s only moral choice, and swiftly forgotten.

FAR RIGHT: The theatre is one of *RavenloK*'s cosiest locations.



Eagleblade Prime is awesomely named, but has little gravitas.



make a trip back to the one NPC that can convert your accrued experience into fixed stat increases and repeat.

Even the game's four unlockable special attacks (two melee, two projectiles, bound to the four shoulder buttons on most gamepads) do very little to spice up the recipe. Operating on cooldowns, they merely accelerate the process of sweeping up the swarms of regular enemies, and further trivialise boss battles with their generous invincibility frames. The boss fights themselves are relatively interesting (at least compared to the rank-and-file monsters), with smooth animations and well-telegraphed attacks, but the camera being fixed means that it's all too easy to get lost behind larger monsters, reducing combat once more to just random flailing until you relocate your own character.

ALICE IN CHAINS

So many of these mechanical shortcomings could be excused if the beautiful backdrops and creative creature designs were used to tell an exciting story, but sadly the plot feels as threadbare as the fighting. Each newly introduced character stands in their designated location, and either explains why they need Ravenlok's help or menaces her briefly until a fight breaks out. There's no room for characters to develop, and dialogue – entirely unvoiced and handled through speech bubbles above characters' heads – often happens with both participants standing side by side and facing the camera, giving it a hollow pantomime feel.

There is no drama, and no escalation, and no depth. Ravenlok herself is a void of a character, cheerfully taking on every request, and while there's the occasional hint at darker things being afoot in Wonderland Dunia, they're left unexplored and swiftly brushed under the rug. I would like to attribute the sinister undercurrent of glossing over these moments to authorial intent, but the vacuousness of the script (with Ravenlok declaring all the weird creatures her friends and family, despite only exchanging a few lines of dialogue with each) implies that there's just nothing of substance here. Even for a kid's game,

it rings hollow, and a few choice grammatical errors and missing words in the script accentuate the amateur vibes.

I wish my complaints could end here, but probably the most jarring part of the entire *Ravenlok* experience is how disjointed everything feels. Each new

environment is beautiful, but they're often connected in the most tenuous of ways. Each of the three worlds is accessed through a teleport or NPC taking you there, which just fades to black and cuts

suddenly to the new location. I could have accepted strange and surreal dreamlike links between areas, but *Ravenlok* just jump-cuts from one screen to the next. Jarringly, some boss fights also take place in an entirely different arena to the place where the enemy was encountered, only to cut back to 'reality' with the boss laying defeated.

Ravenlok's limited content, already thinly spread, feels like it's stretched to breaking point in its final hour. The late-game Clock Tower area is introduced as a boss rush of sorts, requiring you to claim three coins from three floors to progress. The

Sadly the plot feels as threadbare as the fighting

first two floors have fights, but the third just has an NPC casually hand you the third coin. In the very same room, you must insert them into a machine to proceed, only to have nothing happen. Turns out that you need to talk to yet another character in the same room to open the exit door for you. Any sense of escalation or drama is undermined, souring even the impressive environment and boss designs of the area.

A HANDSOME PIG

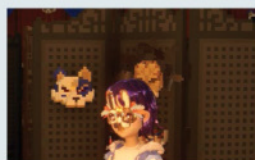
This arbitrary padding continues through the endgame, including one room where to reach a switch that's too high up, you need to pull a lever literally two steps away that lowers it. There is so little to do in each environment that adding one extra button prompt to the scene is still doubling the amount of interaction.

The final stretch – the attack on the Queen's castle – is where it feels like *Ravenlok*'s gameplay budget completely ran out. As always, the environments are immaculate, but the entire final zone is just five rooms. An entry courtyard, a hall, two side-rooms and the final boss chamber, during which time the game tries to introduce a (mercifully short and easy) stealth segment, and five new enemy types. So little room is afforded to this content that there's not room to spawn all of the new enemy types at once. In order to fight them all (which is necessary to progress), I had to press switches to change which types would appear in the two side rooms.

It pains me to be as harsh on *Ravenlok* as I have, as clearly this is a game made with passion and clear artistic intent. But across its five-to-six hour runtime, I never shook the sense that this is an environment art showcase (and a beautiful, polished one at that) with the bare minimum of gameplay layered on top. It's kid-friendly, both in tone and difficulty, but pales in comparison to other games aimed at the younger crowd. Like the very finest porcelain tea sets, it's best left on the shelf to be admired, rather than brought out to entertain at the party. ■

WHAT MAKES A LOOK?

Four aspects that define *Ravenlok*'s aesthetic



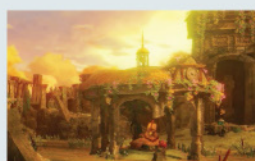
CHUNKY VOXELS

Not overly detailed, but with enough to make each character clear and characterful, like a 2D sprite extruded into 3D space.



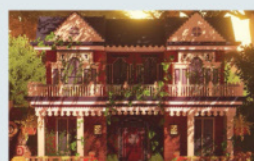
UNFILTERED TEXTURES

Anything that isn't made of voxels is painted in mid-res textures, unsullied by bilinear filtering. No reason to smudge up good art.



MOODY LIGHTING

Every environment in *Ravenlok* is painted with its own palette of light. Cocucumber knows what makes a good sunset.



STARK SHADOWS

Can't have a good sunset without long, sharp shadows. Heavy, dark stencil shade is cast across structures and cast alike.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Beautiful, polished and painfully hollow. *Ravenlok*'s bones are immaculate, but lack connective tissue.

51

SCARY-TALE ADVENTURE

Live out your childhood nightmares in **BRAMBLE: THE MOUNTAIN KING**

By Alexander Chatziioannou

Fairy tales, in their original forms, are not the reassuring bedtime stories we remember from our childhood. Jack and the Beanstalk caps off its home invasion with a murder. Beauty and the Beast revolves around an imprisoned child bride. Dimfrost Studio understands those fables' subtext and has crafted in *Bramble: The Mountain King*, a world that's enchanting and unsettling, even if the accompanying challenge fails to match its mood.

Young Olle wakes up in the middle of the night to discover his sister gone and their cabin, nestled near the edges of the forest, eerily quiet. Determined to find Lillemore, the worried child musters his courage and, against his mother's advice, ventures outside in that domain of trolls and fairies. Backstory details are left hazy: we know little of the siblings' parents, their situation, or the mysterious stretch of countryside they inhabit – an ambiguity that only adds to the escalating sense of menace. Only the narrator's voice interceding in crucial moments with clues and a handful of beautifully illustrated tomes found scattered throughout illuminate the origins of the game's tragic heroes and villains.

Despite the 3D scenery *Bramble* remains a linear affair

Despite the sumptuous 3D scenery *Bramble* remains a strictly linear affair, taking its cues from beloved children-in-peril adventures like *Limbo* and *Little Nightmares*. The sleepy gnome villages and moonlit corpses may look expansive but offer few diversions. There's nothing to do other than press on, the camera jostling you forward, discouraging unnecessary exploration. Even its few collectibles, in the form of wooden figurines of the saga's grotesque cast, are tucked within the predetermined path, rarely necessitating a detour.

GO THROUGH THE MOTIONS

In fact, for long stretches, especially during the first few levels, I felt my

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A dark action adventure infused with Nordic myths and legends

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Dimfrost Studio

PUBLISHER
Merge Games

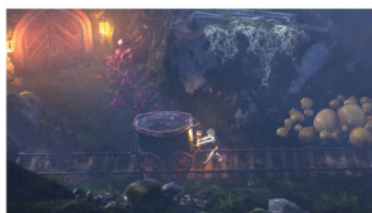
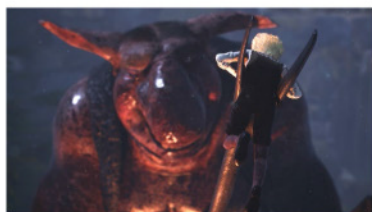
REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-9600K,
16GB RAM,
AMD Radeon 5700 XT

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
dimfroststudio.com/bramble

input amounted to little more than making sure the stick was pointed in whatever direction I needed to go. Proceedings might be showing my plucky hero precariously balancing on a bark suspended above a frothing river, or hanging on for dear life from the vines covering the side of a steep cliff. But the danger of these situations was never conveyed through the game's controls.

After I had progressed deeper into the forest, more active modes of participation were required, typically simple environmental puzzles such as moving a cart about so I could climb onto an out-of-reach ledge, or corralling a herd of cabbage-like creatures into their pen to appease a surly gnome. While usefully breaking the monotony of uninterrupted traversal, these serve mainly to moderate the game's pace, obstacles to prevent me from breezing through to the end, rather than genuine brain-teasers to pit my wits against.

Combat fares significantly better, so it's unfortunate that it's introduced relatively late and reserved exclusively for the occasional boss fight against the Mountain King's nightmarish lieutenants. After Olle



ABOVE: Environmental puzzles are quite simplistic, rarely posing a challenge.

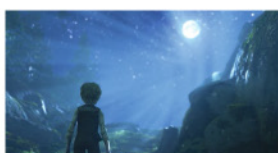


A gaunt-looking scarecrow oversees a desolate stretch of country.

If you suffer from mycophobia, you probably won't want to play this.



ABOVE: Thankfully, you can pet the hedgehog in *Bramble*.



FAR RIGHT: Olle discovers the power of the light.

discovers a sphere of pure light, he employs the artefact not just to illuminate the way or clear the path from thorny brambles that slither away from its radiance, but also as a projectile to strike at enemies.

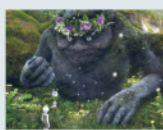
It's not the rote mechanics so much as the grim inventiveness of their staging that makes these rare encounters so captivating: a succubus hovering above the trees shielding herself with the corpses of her former lovers, or a demonic violinist conjuring up deadly melodies in the middle of a placid lake.

As Olle inches closer to his final destination, the story ramps up the bleakness. To the developers' credit, these subplots are not exploited for their shock value but organically incorporated into the fabric of their heathen realm. If *Dimfrost* had shown the same degree of attentiveness to *Bramble: The Mountain King*'s moment-to-moment interactions, we could be talking of an instant classic. As it stands, it's only the world it has crafted that lingers in the mind after the final credits have rolled: a twilight dimension whose darkness is tempered with a sense of wonder. ■

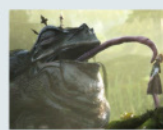


FOREST ALLIES

Everybody needs a helping hand



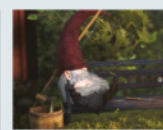
STONE GIANT
Having taken a liking to you, the kindly stone giant lifts you to out-of-reach platforms.



FROG KING
Despite an ominous first appearance, the frog king proves to be a benevolent presence.



HEDGEHOG
An exceedingly good boy, the hedgehog can be persuaded to carry you over large bodies of water.



GNOMES
Gnomes may demand a menial task or a quick game but will repay you with their strength.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Dimfrost Studio's *Bramble: The Mountain King* is a triumph of sinister mood let down by archaic puzzle design.

68

ABSOLUTELY RIVETING

Retro FPS **BOLTGUN** is blessed by the Emperor of Man

By Noah Smith

Boltgun is the first truly exceptional Warhammer 40,000 game since *Dawn of War* 19 years ago. An intense, retro-themed FPS, *Boltgun* casts you as a nameless, faceless Ultramarine: a violently hateful gorilla with the brain of a 14 year old, let loose on the traitorous Black Legion and their daemons. For the uninitiated, what separates Space Marines from the average gym goer is the ten tons of nuclear-powered armour they're entombed within.

Walking is a bit sluggish, but turn on auto-run in the accessibility menu and your soldier, the Sternguard Veteran, becomes a bounding hulk of metal and flesh, a bunnyhopping tornado of pure carnage and zealotry. It's one of the few instances where a licensed *Warhammer* game appropriately conveys the overwhelming power of a single Space Marine. As both a 40K fan with a love of the older source material and boomer shooter veteran, I was thrilled to find that *Boltgun* excels as a tribute to the insanity of the 41st millennium and stands on equal footing with recent classics *Dusk*, *Ultrakill* and *Amid Evil*.

Boltgun's maps are typically linear corridors flooded with cultists and lesser daemons, funnelling the Veteran into larger combat arenas where powerful champions and

ascendant daemons lie in wait. *Doom*-style keycard hunting is kept to a minimum, but there's some clever level design that'll see you looping back through the industrial zones

you've already purged.

The real stars are the daemons of Chaos Undivided

The scale of these levels can be beyond belief. A collapsing cliffside bastion early on boasts an array of mammoth gun emplacements held aloft by great wrought iron girders, the

picked-clean corpses of the titanic warmachines that once carried them to battle slouched over in the distance. A discombobulating set-piece towards the end of chapter one threw me through a warp portal, where my ever-present servo-skull dutifully informed me that "geometry has now become non-euclidian". I was caught in an endlessly looping blender of gothic arch bridges until I began to follow the patterns of

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Warhammer 40,000
retro FPS

EXPECT TO PAY
£19

DEVELOPER
Auroch Digital

PUBLISHER
Focus Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5700G,
16GB RAM,
AMD Radeon RX 5700

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
focus-entmt.com/en/games/warhammer-40000-boltgun

candles, sigils and sacrificial plinths that guided me towards an exit.

Both the occasionally haunting atmosphere and breakneck combat are reinforced by an incredible arrangement of sludgy guitars, thumping industrial beats, and monastic chants and harpsichords. What really impressed me is how organic it sounds – it's like the beating industrial heart of the fascist Imperium of Man is being given musical shape.

CLASH AT DAEMONHEAD

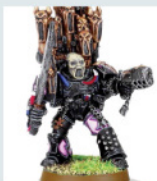
The foes you stare down as one of the Emperor's Angels are wonderfully varied. There's a lot beyond the common Chaos Space Marines and Terminators, like the Aspiring Champion – a tanky melee fighter that'll charge at you with a high-damage chainaxe. Sometimes death isn't the end for these bruisers: after you put them down they can be brought back to life as a Chosen of Chaos, an enraged berserker able to deal near-instant death. hilariously, this whole ritual can be bypassed entirely if you just dump your magazine into his corpse until there's nothing left for the gods to resurrect.

The real stars of the roster are the daemons of Chaos Undivided – these guys are like classic '80s horror mooks pulled from a never-released Sam Raimi film. Lasgun to my head, my favourite are the Pink Horrors, which spawn two blue copies of themselves on death – something which constantly managed to catch me off guard. *Boltgun*'s intense, frenetic combat was always pulling my attention somewhere else before I could finish the job properly.

Boltgun's arsenal incorporates tabletop Warhammer's 'strength vs toughness' check, where a weapon's strength value must equal or surpass the target's toughness value in order to do meaningful damage. It's simpler in practice – if a combatant boasts a high toughness value, shoot them with a big gun. The emphasis on

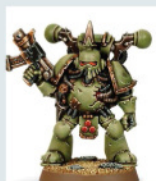
RUINOUS POWERS

Warhammer 40K's Chaotic Traitor Legions



EMPEROR'S CHILDREN

Slaanesh devotees who crave pleasure and pain, strapped up with weaponry.



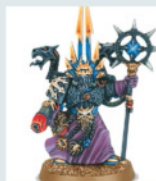
DEATH GUARD

The disease-ridden Death Guard gleefully spread Nurgle's rot across the stars.



WORLD EATERS

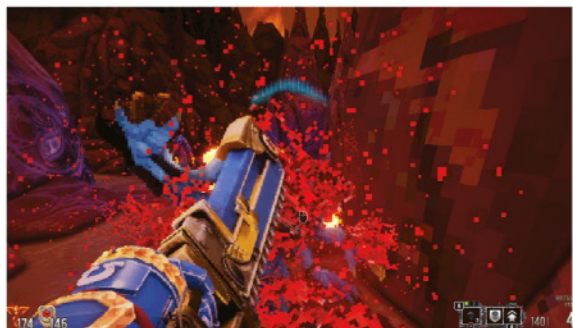
Blood-drunk berserkers, single minded taking skulls for Khorne's Skull Throne.



THOUSAND SONS

The Thousand Sons' arrogant pursuit of knowledge forever bound them to the lord of all change.

Who ate all the pies? This guy.

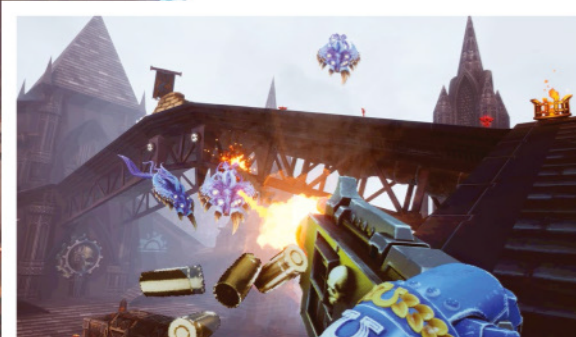


FAR LEFT: Nurgle's disease-ridden daemons deal noxious poison damage on death.

LEFT: A Heresy-era Titan eerily looms in the distance.

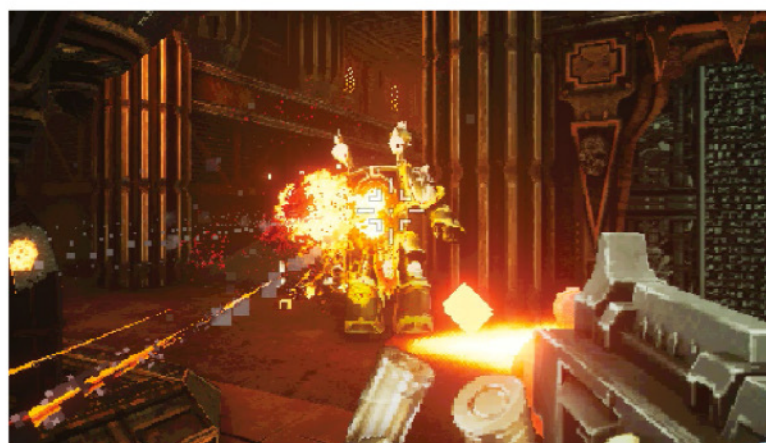
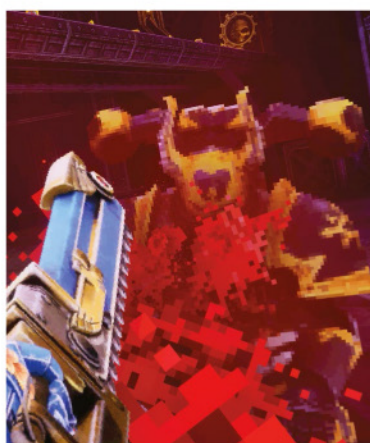


Boltgun's boomstick is one of the best feeling shotguns around.



ABOVE: Overcharging the plasma gun converts health into extra damage.

FAR RIGHT: Terminator suits in cramped corridors are your new worst enemy.



Shoot at the Lord of Change until it dies.



☞ weapon-switching echoes some of *Doom Eternal*'s pattern-recall based gunplay, with the only way to reliably penetrate the psychic field of a Tzeentchian Lord of Change being to rearrange their atoms with a strength 7 plasma gun.

Still, it can be a little fiddly in the heat of battle to remember that the Vengeance Launcher is strength 3 and is best relegated to chaff-clearing duty.

I found it all became second nature after a few levels with each weapon, though. One thing I wished

Boltgun's too-minimal HUD would communicate better is the ammunition in your inventory. You scream through levels at such a blistering pace, and over so many pickups, that more than once I boastfully stared down a Chaos Terminator, assuming the pickups I spent the last 45 seconds clambering over included plasma ammo, only to be painfully chunked into gory gibs by a petty swatting of their power fist.

Grenade information is poorly conveyed as well, with a single icon on the HUD conveying both grenade type and quantity. With battles this intense, the difference between a frag grenade and a Krak grenade can be life or death. It felt like some of the battles where I was on the razor's edge of victory could have been overcome with a HUD that cleanly conveyed the tools at my disposal.

CHAINED UP

Weapons mostly feel like they should, just going off of tabletop vibes. The boltgun, a fully automatic rocket launcher literally bolted inside a rifle casing, lobes out general purpose high explosive death, reliable against mortals and Chaos Marines alike. The shotgun throws out so much lead that entire rooms become painted with the viscera of both cultists and daemons. The melee system is fantastic, too – right-clicking on an enemy will send you flying towards them, chainsword outstretched. Mashing the right mouse button will rev the chainsword – it's great against cultists and lesser daemons, but following up with a quick shotgun blast will typically humble any Chaos Space Marine arrogant enough to linger in the presence of the Emperor's finest.

Slashing with the chainsword can be done in mid-air, dash included, which allows for some gory free mobility as long as there's something heretical nearby. It's a really flavourful mechanic, and adds a lot to what would otherwise be a very simple shoot-and-slash loop. Cultists transform from laughably pathetic foes barely worth paying attention to a finite mobility resource, and using them as blood-filled grapple points to tactically reposition kept me riveted throughout.

The heavy bolter deserves special

mention – this relentless torrent of explosive havoc makes short work of most everything it's pointed at, with its cap on movement speed adequately reflecting the tabletop counterpart's heavy weapon type. Wielding this transhuman-portable death machine made me all the more eager to finish painting the heavy bolter support squad for my Iron Warriors army. *Boltgun* is so good that it got me excited about free-handing hazard stripes.

NEW AGE OF CHAOS

It's always cool to mow down cultists with a heavy bolter, but as a huge fan of the older Games Workshop Chaos Space Marine miniature range, I was struck by how this game's use of newer Chaos designs holds *Boltgun* back from feeling like an authentic '90s FPS. It leapt out at me as a real missed opportunity to commit to the

bit and photoscan some of the hideously ugly 2nd edition Chaos miniatures. Flipping through a mid-'90s Games Workshop catalogue showcases a range of minis that enthusiastically pillage the tombs of sci-fi legends Clark, Asimov, Herbert, Heinlein, and Giger. Maybe that's a copyright minefield to pull from, but missing out on photo-scanned representations of classic Perry-brothers sculpts in favour of cheap-looking pixel art can occasionally make *Boltgun* feel like it reached into a too-recent past and grabbed the wrong references.

Still, Warhammer fans of all stripes will appreciate the attention to detail *Boltgun* manages to pack into its low-poly models. More than once I bounded past a blown-out wall or dashed through ruins that looked like 1:1 copies of the unpainted terrain languishing in my 'to-do' bin. Entering the reliquary under the civilian 'habitation block' (what a normal government would call a 'city') prompts the ever-present Inquisitorial servo-skull to gently remind you your every action and movement is being monitored, and that failure to perform the proper rituals will result in punishment. There's even a dedicated taunt button that prompts the Veteran to snarl the kind of quotes you see on shirts while waiting in line at the hardware store.

These little bits of detail and flourishes of hate and repression are all quintessentially 40K, and help to give *Boltgun* a sense of identity.

Boltgun had won me over early on with an arena battle in a wide-open loading bay surrounded by gothic spires, the words "PURGE!" flashing across the screen in blood red. With full health and little ammo, I had to face down the mutant mob ahead with only my chainsword and shotgun. I died more than a few times, but the final gouging of my blade into a Chosen of Chaos really did bring back two of my favourite gaming memories – my first time clearing 'Dead Simple' on Nightmare difficulty in *Doom 2*, and wiping my friend Adam's left flank off the table at my local gaming store. ■

ANATOMY OF AN ULTRAMARINE

The tools for the strongest Space Marine

1 BOLTGUN
A large .75 calibre hand cannon that fires armour-piercing explosive rounds.

2 CHAINWORD
For close-quarters combat, expert in gutting flesh and rending armour plating.

3 POWER ARMOUR
Imbues the Ultramarine with great power, speed and protection.



PC GAMER VERDICT

A stupendously fun FPS – a treat for Warhammer players and a worthy member of the growing legion of retro shooters.

85

ROAD RAGE

Ride into the heart of hell in **DARKEST DUNGEON 2**

By Sean Martin

Darkest Dungeon 2 is a hard game to love at times. Just like its party of heroes packed into an armoured coach and sent rumbling down the road towards oblivion, negative feelings are somewhat inevitable. It might be when an untimely series of crits kill a hero and leaves your party in shambles, or when you arrive at the mountain after four regions to find a final boss you're completely unprepared for.

There are myriad perils that can end a run and banish you back to the shadowy edges of the map to lick your wounds and grumble. As with its predecessor, love and hate spin on the same strange axis, and it's ultimately up to you to decide if the eventual triumph is worth the tribulation it takes to get there.

This isn't really a sequel so much as it is a complete revamp of the original game's formula. Gone are the ruined estate and ramshackle hamlet that you lovingly restore, replaced by a rickety stagecoach you ride through a world fallen to madness. You'll navigate each roguelite region node to node, balancing risk and reward to earn trinkets, baubles, and reach the mountain with hale and hearty heroes ready to take on the cosmic monstrosity that awaits. If you fail, it's back to the start to spend your candles to unlock upgrades and heroes to make your next go easier.

Despite a mixed reception when it launched in Early Access back in October, 2021, Red Hook has made some smart design choices along the way, introducing the persistent progression system of candles and adding The Radiant Flame – an easy mode item you can equip that gets stronger with each failure. Despite any criticisms I have, version 1.0 is definitely the strongest iteration of the game so far.

SHOT IN THE DARK

Your typical run of *Darkest Dungeon 2* lasts a couple of hours, as you fight battles and pilot your coach through

hazards. It's both a moody and scenic affair as you rattle through each nightmarish landscape, strengthening heroes, managing resources and deciding whether to take on the lair

boss dwelling in each region before reaching the safety of the next inn. There's a lot of tactical depth to be had, but it can be a bit of a slog at times.

Darkest Dungeon 2 is a time-hungry game in terms of how long

it takes to complete a run and the investment required to gather candles to unlock trinkets, upgrades, items, and just about anything that provides

Not really a sequel but a complete revamp of the formula

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A roguelite road trip and sort of sequel to *Darkest Dungeon*

EXPECT TO PAY

£40

DEVELOPER

Red Hook

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i5 12400F, 16GB RAM, AMD Radeon RX 6800 XT

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

darkestdungeon.com/darkest-dungeon-2

an advantage. Take shrines of reflection, for instance; these nodes grant a permanent ability to your chosen hero, offering backstory or a puzzle battle, but to get every ability for a single character you need to visit six shrines, and that means multiple runs with that hero present.

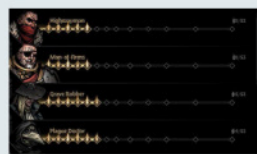
Experimenting with new characters is fun, and the game incentivises it with hero goals for candles, paths to focus their combat role and random starting quirks. At the same time, however, there is a final boss you have to defeat at the end of a run, and the quickest way to do that is to strengthen and invest in a single party of heroes instead. I'm sure *Darkest Dungeon 2* is lots of fun in its final form, as you experiment with all abilities, paths and characters unlocked, but the sheer groundwork required to reach that point in terms of persistent progression is a big time commitment, and one I'm not convinced the game's five regions and nodes necessarily bear the weight of.

Still, Red Hook does justice to its returning cast of characters with excellent combat, made flashier with 3D animations, and easier to understand through a new token system, offering visual representation for buffs, debuffs and character mechanics. Sadly, the same level of investment that made its predecessor great isn't there.

It's easy to appreciate what *Darkest Dungeon 2* is: a gloomy road trip, bolstered by excellent combat. Even though I think it feels like a conflicted game in terms of wanting players to experiment, but requiring significant progression to do so, there's lots to love, especially for those who'll get a kick out of seeing the setting further fleshed out. ■

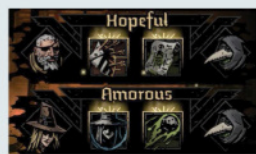
INTO THE DARK

Tips to help you triumph



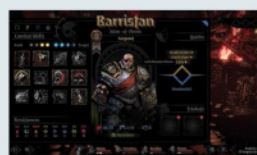
PICK A PATH

Upgrade each hero to unlock their Paths; powerful ability buffs that help define their role in the party.



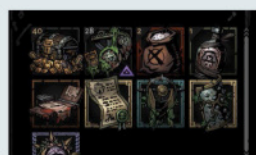
FRIENDLY FACES

Keep stress low and use inn items to maintain positive affinity between your heroes.



QUIRKY

Choose heroes with powerful quirks and visit hospitals to remove negative quirks.



TRINKETS AND BAUBLES

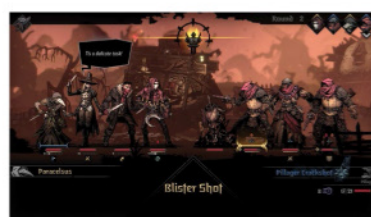
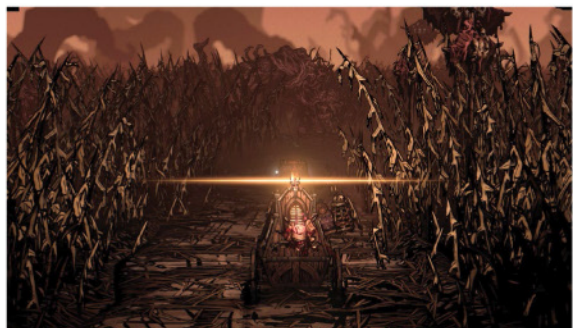
Buy powerful Trinkets from the Hoarder with Baubles or defeat lair bosses to earn them.

PC GAMER VERDICT

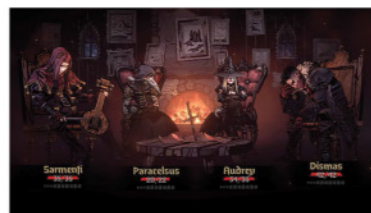
Darkest Dungeon 2 is a fun, engaging roguelite experience, despite sacrificing some of what made the original great.

75

Rolling Resolute or
Meltdown on max stress
can sink or save you.



FAR LEFT: You
can bolster
your stagecoach
with upgrades,
including a pet.



LEFT: Breaking
down on the road
is bad news.



Heroes can fulfil different
roles once you unlock
all their abilities.

TKON THE PISS

Get ready for pure **STAR TREK** magic in **RESURGENCE**

By Lauren Aitken

The first duty of every Starfleet officer is to the truth," is one of Captain Picard's most iconic lines, and the team at Dramatic Labs – a bunch of self-confessed diehard Trekkies – have embodied that mantra in their Telltale-esque adventure, *Star Trek: Resurgence*. The story is the perfect mix of everything Star Trek and Telltale's choice-based narrative: humour, gentle moments that focus on care and affection, and phaser fights with lots of diving about.

The Telltale formula of a strong narrative combined with morally ambiguous decision-making – and plenty of QTEs – seems to fit the Star Trek storytelling style perfectly. But Dramatic Labs offers something more: complicated puzzles, stealth sequences, time-sensitive exploration objectives, better cinematics, and an overall departure from the Telltale default of feeling like you're watching an interactive movie. *Resurgence* isn't an episodic tale. Rather than having five distinct acts or episodes that arrive separately you'll get to play it all at once as you swap between the two player characters, who each get their own uniquely titled episodes, much like you'd see in *The Next Generation*.

Star Trek: Resurgence is meant to represent roughly three full-length

films and ties in nicely to the post-TNG era series and movies. It's set in 2380, right after the events of *Nemesis* and 16 years after the beginning of *The Next Generation*.

Also, everyone is wearing DS9-style uniforms, so you know it's going to be good. It brings together a balanced mix of bridge crew antics – a well-established Star Trek approach – and the inspiring, comic-

relief side of the lower decks, which we've seen in the newest animated series. Only, the lower decks characters become the real heroes and villains in this story, showing that wearing three pins on your uniform isn't the be-all and end-all.

I HAVE PRINCIPLES

You switch between playing as First Officer Jara Rydek and Petty Officer

The lower decks characters become the real heroes

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A singleplayer choice-driven action story set in the post-TNG era

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Dramatic Labs

PUBLISHER
Bruner House

REVIEWED ON
Intel i7-9700F, RTX 2070 Super, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

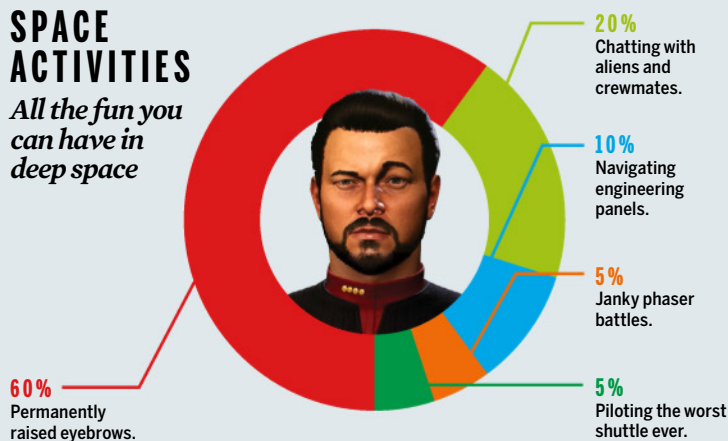
LINK
resurgence.com

Carter Diaz. Both are loyal Starfleet officers and, aside from a few snide comments, there's no real option to go rogue. With Jara, you can choose to be a by-the-book type who's loyal to her captain, or more of a character who plays fast and loose with the rules. She's a Kobliad, an endangered race who rely on Deuridium infusions to survive. Star Trek captains often make difficult decisions that trickle down to the rest of the crew, sometimes involving sacrifice for the greater good. *Resurgence* opens with that theme, with the *Resolute* having just been repaired after a 'malfunction' at the hands of Captain Solano. Jara joins the *Resolute* as an outsider and is made aware straight from the off that she'll need to work twice as hard to gain the crew's trust, but not before the captain demands absolute loyalty from her. Not being one to bend the knee on demand, I opted for a more 'sure, but my loyalties are with Starfleet' approach – needless to say, the captain wasn't pleased.

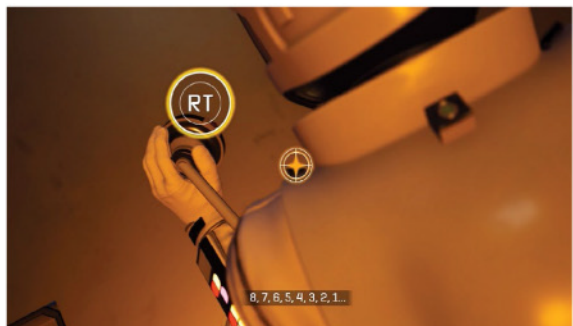
The other player character, Carter, has a gentler introduction; he's part of the engineering team under Engineering Chief Chovak, an ultra-sarcastic Vulcan. He chums along with fellow petty officer Nili Edsilar, an unjoined Trill, and is a talented young engineer. I opted to keep a happy-go-lucky attitude with Carter, with the greater good vibe of Starfleet as his morality meter, although I did choose to start a romance with another officer which... well, I'll get back to that. At first, it seems his character will be the jokey one who'd find himself in sticky yet hilarious situations, but he quickly proves himself to be one hell of an officer and makes bridge-level life-or-death decisions. His is by far the more engaging and exciting storyline, and without him, *Resurgence* would have just been another retelling of an XO making one morally grey choice after another. That being said, Jara's story is still a

SPACE ACTIVITIES

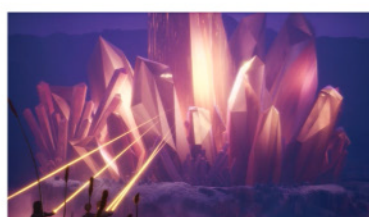
All the fun you can have in deep space



I'm going through some changes.



Star trekking across the universe...

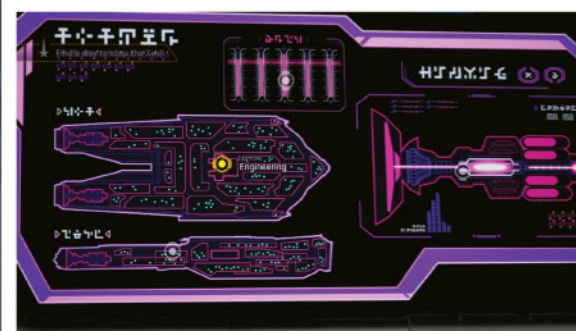


LEFT: I'm sure shooting these ancient crystals will be fine.



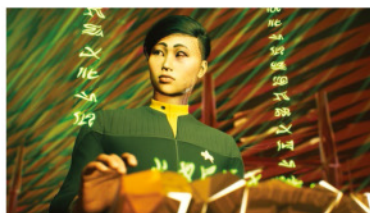
BELOW: Starfleet's counterfeit boots police squad busts another bootlegger.





ABOVE: Jara getting told her copy of PC Gamer magazine is delayed in the post.

FAR RIGHT: The U.S.S. Resolute is your home.



You were only supposed to blow the bloody doors off.

complicated one that challenges leadership and loyalty, and she has to make some life-altering decisions.

MADE UP

Resurgence introduces two new species: the Hotari – a rocky-faced, hardy, and previously subservient species who mined on their planet's moon, Tau – and the Alydians, a tall Kelpian/Kaminoan-looking species who are staunchly militaristic and who once seemed to control the Hotari by forcing them to work in the mines that they technically owned. Jara and the crew of the *Resolute* are tasked with arbitration between the two races as they each seek control of the mines and the Dilithium within. Only, there's ancient, advanced Tkon technology at work here, and not everyone is who they say they are.

While it's always fun to see familiar faces in Star Trek, I was very excited to see the two new species specifically created for *Resurgence*. Coming up with a species name is one thing, but how do you create two races that slot seamlessly into the Star Trek universe – especially when the bulk of Star Trek's alien appearances were the result of heavy use of prosthetics? In lieu of prosthetics, we've got detailed alien faces courtesy of the Unreal Engine, but while the facial animations for the Alydians and Hotari are certainly emotive and dynamic, the human faces have a big *Mass Effect 1* stray eyebrow energy and everyone looks mildly confused and slightly annoyed. Fortunately, it takes a little more than a bombastic side-eye to put me off a *Trek* game. Though the final frontier can look lovely, *Resurgence* has a definite last-gen look and has some off-putting low-quality textures throughout the environments. The running animation in particular is awkward, not to mention slow.

With the help of a Hotari, Tylas, Jara uncovers a terrible secret – the Hotari discovered a Tkon artefact and used it to seize control of the mines, but not before their minds were replaced by Tkon via a process called bioforming. And now everyone's at risk of becoming a Tkon, whether they are Hotari, Alydian or from Starfleet. If you think this sounds a lot like the Borg and

their attempts to assimilate everyone, you'd be right – the word 'futile' is uttered by the Tkon host leader, Galvan, more than once.

PUSH THE BUTTON

What lets *Resurgence* down is the overuse of QTEs. In some sections, you'll be absolutely bombarded with them every few steps you take, and a lot of them are incredibly mundane, like simply pressing a button. And when a failure leads to a game over screen, you'll have to replay the entire section again, without the ability to even skip dialogue. While the QTEs undeniably add more tension, even when simply climbing a ladder, I would have liked the opportunity to do a little more wandering around. The phaser battle scenes had clunky controls, but if you keep dying like I did, you have the option to play in story mode which negates any damage, which was a welcome relief. Not every failed QTE results in a game over, though, as I learned during a few crucial moments, where I had to live with the consequences of my indecision.

In saying that, there's an exciting mix of dialogue choices, QTEs, transporter puzzles, shuttle flying and the phaser fights are quite arcade-like, but they are all a bit janky. The shuttle flying is boring and a little too simplistic, with a laborious flying-through-the-rings sequence. Trying to aim with the phaser during shootouts was also a pain, thanks to the sluggish controls. There is no

What lets *Resurgence* down is the overuse of QTEs

MEET YOUR HEROES

Here's to the second finest crew in Starfleet



COMMANDER JARA RYDEK

- Kobliad.
- Loyal to Starfleet.
- Takes no prisoners.



PETTY OFFICER CARTER DIAZ

- Happy to be here.
- Sacrifices friends.
- Hopeless romantic.

option to adjust the mouse or controller sensitivity and, all too often, panning the screen or aiming was too slow and time-consuming. The stealth sequences, however, are actually a lot of fun, and progression is saved at the right points so there were fewer do-overs.

While Star Trek often has a superb musical accompaniment, *Resurgence*'s soundtrack leaves something to be desired – it sounds a lot like midi tracks you'd find on a mid-2000s mobile phone, which is a bit of a disconnect from the usual orchestral backing from the shows and films. It did get a little frustrating hearing the same melodies on repeat as I had to redo failed sections, but that says more about me needing to get good at games than it does about whoever wrote the score.

Disappointingly, there are no real opportunities to set up *Resurgence* to your own liking. There are no accessibility options and screen resolution choices are extremely limited. There's no ability to rebind controls or turn off the motion blur which, at times, gave me a little motion sickness, and neither is there an unlockable framerate. While past Telltale games also had this lack of personalisation and accessibility options, it's frustrating to see the devs fail to include them here.

The complement of the USS *Resolute* may not be the finest crew in Starfleet – not when Captain Riker is out there commanding the *Titan* – but Carter is now one of my most-loved Trek characters. It would have been easy to have you roleplaying as a well-established captain or officer, but in focusing on new characters and lower decks antics, Dramatic Labs has created something special. *Resurgence* takes the best of Telltale's flavour and smashes it together with an excellent Star Trek story to create something that's fresh. Yes, characters unavoidably die and the story takes a few hours to really take off, but it's worth it – I haven't cried as much at a Star Trek story since Data sacrificed himself in *Nemesis*, so read into that what you will. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Resurgence is the perfect mash-up of dramatic Star Trek storytelling and Telltale choice-driven narration.

75

PREHISTORIC BLISS

ROOTS OF PACHA innovates in the Stone Age without reinventing the wheel

By Andrea Shearon

I've spent decades inheriting farms in desperate need of rehabilitation. On acres of forgotten land, I methodically till, plant, and harvest until I've grown popular with the locals. My reputation as an expert farmer earns me a modest living, and I'm often up plowing before sunrise, sometimes working until a neighbour finds me facedown in a pile of turnips. That's all in *Harvest Moon*, by the way. In reality, I can hardly keep a cactus alive.

Roots of Pacha is a prehistoric farming simulator that brilliantly iterates on a genre famous for finding joy in the monotonous and mundane. It quickly establishes its interest in building community more than its genre cousins. Instead of leaving first-time farmers to fend for themselves, your clan settles together. I spent my first spring as a Pachan living in my grandparent's home, and with their help, I steadily accrued 'contribution' – *Pacha*'s currency with a communal spin.

As an individual, I earn contribution by dropping items into the community bin. I can spend points on tools, seeds and the like, but I'm not the only one who benefits from the success. My contribution feeds into a secondary prosperity pool, which unlocks better village infrastructure for the clan. Everyone's growth adds to the sum.

Pacha doesn't lean too heavily into replicating the genre's time sinks or try to be radically different. Simple quests are just cleverly woven together. Animals are caught instead of bought. Crops have added nuances. *Pacha* looks a little samey, but tweak the recipe too much and the formula would lose its potency.

The 'idea' system's net of chores propelled me along. When I had to venture into the caves I sought out blacksmith Acre, whose inventions made me excited to go spelunking. Helping Acre discover ore led to a chain of accomplishments involving Croll. The more I did for her, the more Croll improved my facilities.

Pacha kept distracting me in the best ways. While searching for more animals I'd get sidetracked by plants. One such discovery landed me a handful of buckwheat seeds instead of the bright green ostrich I'd set out for, but those seeds eventually became alcohol and inspired an idea in another Pachan. Two days later, she discovered how to make pickles.

I'll still get a little too focused on a single farm product, but *Pacha* isn't punitive. When I got really into corn, my knowledge rank for corn improved. Wild corn evolved

I fell hard for characters like Mana, who became my love interest

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cosy, stone age farming sim that delights in genre staples

EXPECT TO PAY
£22

DEVELOPER
Soda Den

PUBLISHER
Crytivo

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10700k, 64GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080, plus Steam Deck

MULTIPLAYER
Four-player online co-op

LINK
rootsofpacha.com

into domestic cobs. As an esteemed corn scholar, Pachans gave me new ways to process the grain, helping me produce flour and oil.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

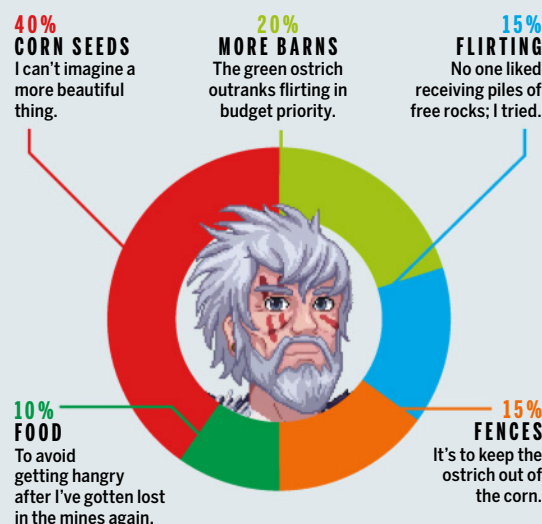
With so many characters eager to share ideas, I focused on the big picture for a while, initially uninterested in individual villagers. But it wasn't long before my neighbours' compassion endeared me through more personal scenes.

I fell hard for characters like Mana, who became my love interest. As I showered her with gifts, Mana shared struggles with her father's strict adherence to tradition. He was frustrated with her attempts to nominate someone outside the family for a clan competition. Usually that honour went to the eldest son, but Mana suggests they send Garrek, a young man unrelated to her family with plenty of wisdom but no self-esteem. Unlike typical fractured storylines, Mana's arc bled into Garrek's struggle with self-confidence, fuelling my desire to get to know both.

These threads cultivate a farming sim where every chore feels purposeful. Some ideas required more tedious tasks like fishing, but as I went on those excursions I met characters eager to help. Some systems were overwhelming in the busiest moments (like worrying about individual plant knowledge), and I did run into the occasional bug, but *Roots of Pacha* has earned itself a spot among farm-centric life sim titans for its clever community-driven systems – never neglecting genre staples (like corn), and innovating when I didn't even realise there was room to grow. ■

SOWING OATS

A Pachan farmer's seasonal expenses



PC GAMER VERDICT

Cultivates a charming, community-driven vision of the Stone Age that's endlessly satisfying and always enchanting.

88

Inza's fishing wisdom doesn't account for my limited stamina.



FAR LEFT: We're all Garrek, and that's why I'm rooting for him.

LEFT: A place where ostriches, bison, guanaco, and boars live in harmony.

BELOW: Community gatherings make the gift-giving way easier.



SHOCKINGLY GOOD

Nightdive's **SYSTEM SHOCK** is a great but conservative remake

By Joshua Wolens

Let me tell you about the one that got away. She was pitiless and cruel, narcissistic and delusional. She unfurled through Citadel Station in a thousand security cameras and as many cyborg slaves, their meat taken from the bodies of the outpost's former staff. She made pustules and blisters, mutants and monsters. She was the death of me a million times over, and I've missed her more than words can say.

She is SHODAN, of course, the malevolent AI goddess who was the centrepiece and proudest creation of 1994's *System Shock*, now rebuilt in sparkling Unreal Engine 4 in this remake from Nightdive Studios. It suits her. Gone are the sprite-based enemies and screen-eating UI from the original game, replaced by clanking, three-dimensional automatons and an inventory that is certainly easier to use than the original's rolling shopping list of weapons, explosives, and stimulants.

Both *System Shock* and SHODAN are legendary; they're iconic symbols of an era and philosophy in game design, and remaking them must have been a daunting task for Nightdive. How do you change-up the game that first used the 451 code, the one that every immersive sim still

uses to mark itself as part of the tribe to this day, without being accused of sacrilege and blasphemy?

The answer, to the remake's benefit and detriment, is 'faithfully'.

Leaves most of the best and worst of the original game intact

Nightdive's *System Shock* is still very much that game from 1994. It's a project that aims to upgrade, beautify, and smooth down some rough edges. There are a few new additions, but this is no sweeping overhaul, and

it leaves most of the best and worst of the original game intact.

REMEMBER CITADEL

System Shock's setup is classic cyberpunk fare, as easy-to-grasp today as it was 29 years ago. You're a hacker, a future ne'er-do-well who gets caught trying to sneak their way into the servers of the TriOptimum Corporation. In the prologue you

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An FPS/survival horror remake of one of the first progenitors to modern immersive sims

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Nightdive

PUBLISHER
Prime Matter

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 3700X,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
systems shock.com

barely make it through the login screen before thugs with guns kick down your door.

Not to worry, one of the worst people in the world – a corporate executive – has an offer for you: use your talents to break the ethical restraints on the AI, SHODAN, that runs TriOp's Citadel Station facility near Saturn and he'll not only let you go, he'll furnish you with cybernetics you were trying to steal in the first place. You do it. You regret it.

Then the game begins, and the remake's devotion to the original becomes immediately apparent. After a six-month post-surgery convalescence, you awaken in one of Citadel Station's medical bays, an almost one-to-one recreation of the same starting area from the first game. There's the health pack on the shelf to your right, the steep ramp down to the exit and storage closet, and you even have to hit a button next to the closet door to open it, rather than simply clicking on the door itself like you usually do.

It feels like Nightdive is trying to convince you that you're in safe hands, "Don't worry, we won't do anything drastic to this thing we all love." I suspect it's exactly what a lot of nostalgic fans want to see, and honestly? It mostly works. My memory of the original game isn't good enough to tell you if every map is an exact recreation of its 1994 counterpart, but I experienced repeated déjà vu through all my 20 hours of playing.

Citadel's hallways are a joy to roam in the remake, just as they were in the original, and exploration will reward you with new weapons, new cyberware, new reserves of your ever-dwindling supplies of ammo, or most precious of all, literal trash, which you can exchange for credits at the game's recyclers to buy mods for your expanding roster of guns.

That addition aside, it's still the Citadel Station I remember, but where before those hallways were

A SYSTEM SHOCK TIMELINE

How many have there been, and what's next?



SYSTEM SHOCK 1994

The original *System Shock* is a landmark in the development of immersive sims. It got a gussied-up enhanced edition, also by Nightdive, in 2015.



SYSTEM SHOCK 2 1999

System Shock 2 feels modern compared to its predecessor. With its RPG mechanics and legendary twist, it's still worth playing today.



SYSTEM SHOCK REMAKE 2023

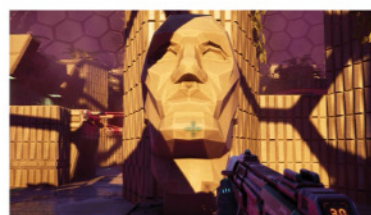
A brisk 24 years after the last game, Nightdive takes a stab at remaking the original. And you know what? It did pretty well.



SYSTEM SHOCK 3 20??

Set to pick up where *System Shock 2* left off, the third game is in production under OtherSide Entertainment, maker of *Underworld Ascendant*.





ABOVE: You're the only human left aboard Citadel Station.

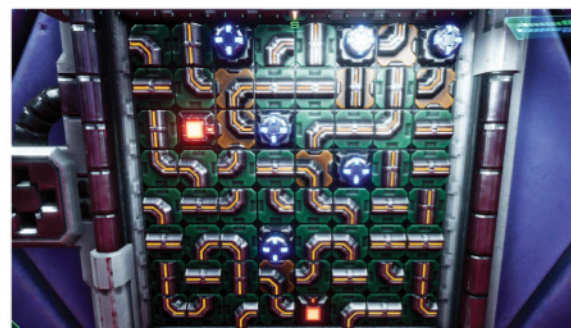
FAR LEFT: Cyberspace is swimmy, trippy, and outrageously '90s.



Many of the remake's environments are recreations of the original's.

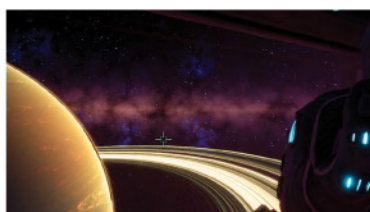
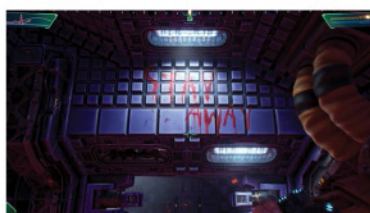


SHODAN's back, and it's great to see her again.



RIGHT: The remake nails *System Shock*'s atmosphere.

BELOW: SHODAN's minions are the repurposed husks of Citadel's staff.



bright, wobbly, and flat, now they have a fully-realised physicality, all dark and brooding, made of materials that clang or thud or ding as stray shots glance off them.

PUNCHING DECK

The station is only one part of *System Shock*, the other being the tremendously '90s idea of cyberspace. At certain points you run up to a terminal, jack in, and find yourself in an area that shares that same sense of space.

It actually makes it feel a fair bit different in this iteration of *System Shock*. In place of the sparse and confusing wireframe of the first game, *Nightdive* has created a mode that is, well, basically *Descent*. It's colourful and fast-paced, especially compared to the non-cyberspace parts of the game, electronic music blares and the unrelenting relativity of up and down might have you feeling a little seasick as you dodge spiralling patterns of energy projectiles from throngs of enemies.

The cyber-vibes are immaculate: hacking is an extended hallucinatory episode, and it immediately had me thinking of 1995's *Hackers* and the cyberspace scenes from the 1996 FMV game *Ripper*.

It's not perfect, and sometimes cyberspace combat amounts to holding strafe while keeping your crosshair trained on an enemy that looks disconcertingly like an anthropomorphic octopus. The way the final cyberspace encounter has been dramatically changed is more of a sidegrade than anything, but the studio has done a great job of bringing this segment of the game up-to-date and simplifying it while keeping its vibes intact. I can't help but wonder what the result would have been if *Nightdive* had adopted a similar willingness to change things up with the rest of the game.

TEDIOUS ANARCHY

Because, although it tickles my nostalgia centres, there are downsides to *Nightdive*'s reverence for the first game. Citadel was a maze back then and it's a maze now, a mess of switchbacks, nooks and crannies.

At first, that just makes for fun exploration, but it becomes laborious when you have to navigate through

its mazes again and again, and again. One of the artefacts of the original game's design that *Nightdive* has brought over unchanged is a wearying amount of backtracking. Citadel Station is built vertically into nine floors, and no-one decided to just build one elevator that goes to every single one.

Sometimes cyberspace combat amounts to holding strafe

That means when, for example, the game decides it's time for you to go back to level 3 at the end of level 6, you have to navigate your way to different elevators on each floor in between them, sometimes at opposite

poles of twisting areas. More than once, I found myself maximising the game's map and just playing that, guiding the arrow denoting my character through long corridors towards what I desperately hoped was the right lift.

Speaking of the map, by the way, let me take this moment to emphasise that you should play this game with a keyboard and mouse, at least until it gets its console release and *Nightdive* backports whatever controller modifications it makes to those versions. The game's UI – a marked improvement over the original – just isn't pleasant to navigate using a cursor controlled by your right analogue stick.

Likewise, between your suite of cybernetic powers and the game's myriad weapons, it sometimes feels like there's just too much of *System Shock* to fit on a gamepad's limited

buttons, leaving you hunting through its inventory screen at a snail's pace to find the thing you want while enemies are bearing down.

The situation wasn't helped by another bit of painstaking fidelity to the original project: the absence of an objective screen or mission markers. Instead, you need to pay attention to the logs you pick up and emails you receive to figure out what to do next.

That doesn't sound too hard, but you'll often find yourself distracted when they're playing. More than once I found myself arriving at a new floor not entirely certain of what I was meant to be doing there, but hoping that with enough aimless blundering I'd eventually hit the lever or hack the control panel that would progress the story.

That's less damning than it might sound. You can always pore through your collected audio logs to find the one that tells you where to go, and like I said, wandering a new area is rewarding all by itself. These are things that will occasionally irritate you, not the kind of problems that ever seriously threaten to spoil your experience. But I did sometimes find myself wishing that *Nightdive* had tried to adapt the spirit, rather than the letter, of the original game.

IMMORTAL MACHINE

Years and years ago, *Nightdive*'s project to remake *System Shock* was put on hold so that the devs could "reassess" their path. They'd suffered mission creep, it was said, and strayed too far from their original vision of modernising the original game. Those new ideas ate up an already limited budget and risked angering Kickstarter backers who, more than anything, just wanted a modern recreation of a beloved classic.

Well they got it, and you know what? It's great. This is the definitive way to play *System Shock* in 2023 and beyond, but I can't help but wonder what that other world looks like. The one where *Nightdive* had the budget and the goodwill to take a few more risks, make a few more changes, and dramatically reduce the number of times it asked me to make a U-turn. ■

GETTING ATTACHED

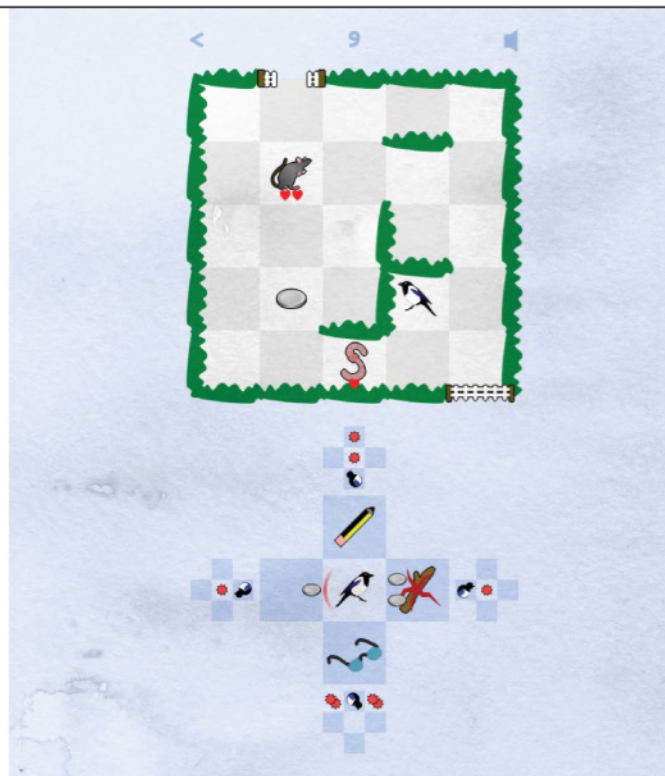
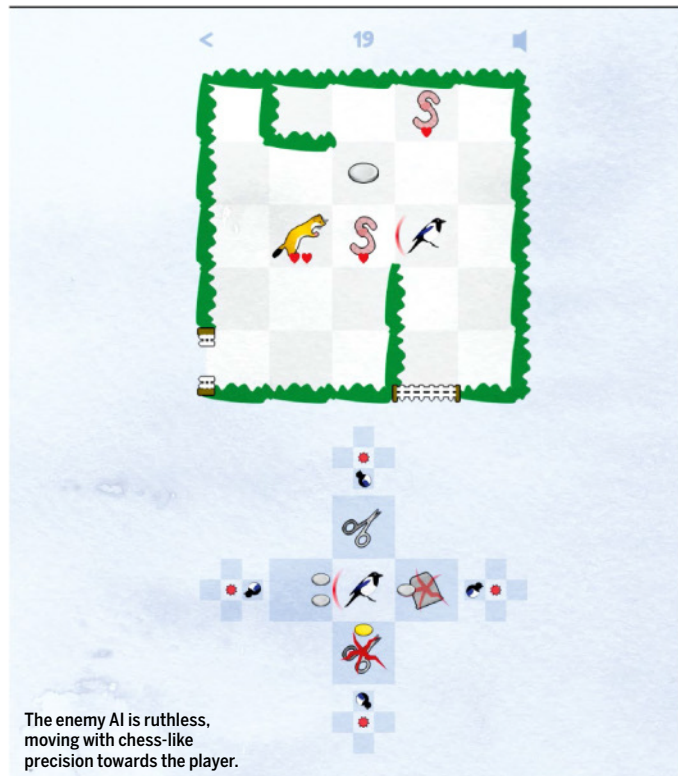
Cyber attachments to take on SHODAN

 COMPASS Basic, boring, and vital if you don't want to rot in one of Citadel's dead ends.	 VISION ENHANCEMENT A pretty grandiose name for what is, in essence, a torch.	 ENERGY SHIELD Now we're talking. Essential to endure the blasts and blows of SHODAN's slaves.
 SENSAROUND RADAR Picks out items and enemies on the minimap.	 ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION Defends you against the radiation and viruses you'll find.	 TURBO BOOTS Travel at 100 mph! Leap 50 feet in the air! Plaster yourself against a bulkhead!

PC GAMER VERDICT

Nightdive's efforts is a smart, faithful remake and easily the definitive way to play *System Shock* today.

80



SHINY OBJECTS

Bird is the word in tactical roguelike **MAGPIE**

Inspired by the games of Michael Brough, *Magpie* is a roguelike with a similarly mysterious nature, despite its cute natural creatures aesthetic. Lying at the heart of the average Brough game are the initially inscrutable rules, and that's true in this (slightly more straightforward) roguelike jam game. You're a magpie, and you're trying to advance through an endless procession of small rooms, as worms, rats and other critters try to eat you.

The thing about you being a magpie though, is that you bloody love shiny objects, which comprise your weapons as you hop from tile to tile. You begin with four wooden twigs, but as you collect coins and purchase upgrades, you'll soon wield scissors, safety pins and other discarded items. Each has different properties, and it's a tactical dilemma picking between them. Would you rather an attack that hits in multiple directions, or a weapon that can't be broken? If that was all, it might be enough, but you also need to consider the weapon slot, as each aligns to a direction on the cursor keys. Weapons are used automatically as you bump into enemies above, below, or to your sides.

You have to make the most of the weapons offered to you

You'll spend a lot of time shuffling round each level, trying to approach the devious critters from the best angle. If you're attacked on a side where you're not holding a weapon – because it's been damaged or broken – your magpie will suffer damage, and eventually perish.

There's no levelling up, so you have to make the most of the weapons offered to you, and try to make enemies to come to you, so you can hit them first. I soon came to learn that it was better to avoid enemies if at all possible, as I wasn't going to earn anything from them, even points.

EARLY BIRD

I'm always on the lookout for games like *Magpie* that find a middle-

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A turn-based roguelike where you play as a hoarding magpie

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
sunil

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/MagpieGame

ground between simplicity and tactical depth. They're the holy grail when you have a *bit* of time to play a game, but not enough to don your bicorn hat, uncork the brandy, and settle into your leather armchair for an evening's session.

Magpie, thankfully, gets you into the thick of it immediately, and it's not long before you've acquired some meaningful upgrades. In fact, you'll be making tactical decisions just a few screens in. How should I approach this gang of enemies, who seem unerringly intelligent as they dance towards me? If I take one more hit on my exposed right side, I'll die.

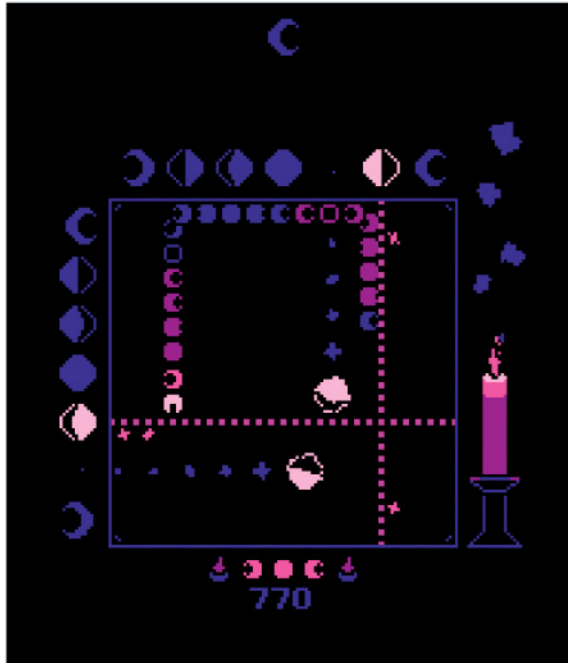
That's when you see it: the coin. Picking it up counts as spending a turn. If I can grab it, I'll be out of step with my relentless enemies. That can be difference between life and death: who goes first in a melee. It's a bird-eat-bird world in this tactically deep roguelike. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A traditional roguelike, with fresh ideas and lots of tactical depth. Every move matters when you're a tasty magpie.

79

BELOW: The dotted lines are traps.



SOLID SNAKE

The moon is a harsh mistress in **SNAKLIPSE**

Snake is given new life in the enigmatic *Snaklapse*, a dodge-'em-up with a witchy flavour. The usual rules of Snake apply – you're eating dots that make you longer, and you'll be harmed by crashing into your tail – but there are also all these moons at the edges of the screen.

The moons attack at regular phases, either by physically flying into the stage or firing out damaging trap lines. Stumble into one of these and your health – represented by a candle – will wear down a chunk. The only way to keep it topped up is to eat those twinkling dots that keep appearing. But can you reach them without bumping into yourself?

Those are the basics, and they make for an engaging spin on *Snake*. As the candle drips down, you have to grab dots to top it up, but as you do

so your tail grows unhelpfully longer. Thankfully, you have an ace up your sleeve: the power to hop over traps, or even your own tail.

All these elements collide to make a highly replayable arcade action game. I like that there's no global high score table, just your own to try and beat each time. It reinforces that this is a small thing, a little personal challenge. You'll also unlock alternate colour schemes, as you end a run and bank your score as XP.

In finding *Snaklapse*, I've also discovered a treasure trove of similar games made by the same developer, Kultisti. While an enjoyable game in its own right, *Snaklapse* feels like it's part of a whole, together with their other action games. After you've lost enough snakes, be sure to check out the rest of Kultisti's bewitching catalogue. ■

71

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Kultisti

LINK
bit.ly/snaklapse

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

Taking my sweet time with roguelike **CRAVESPACE**

The ever-adaptable ASCII alphabet has been put to an inventive new use. We're used to symbols standing in for creatures and loot, in traditional turn-based roguelikes. However, here they take the form of spaceships, bullets and other space clutter. *Cravespace* is still a roguelike, but primarily it's a shoot-'em-up – it's *Space Invaders*.

As in that classic, you control a ship as enemies descend from the top, although everyone involved moves a mite more intelligently here. Ships move up and down, as well as left and right. Some of the bigger craft will even offload smaller ships.

The end result is a game of exciting dogfighting, feeling strangely fresh as it's all on a flat 2D plane. You'll pop off shots and dodge missiles, collect power-ups and

ultimately advance to new space sectors. And you'll do it all step by step, as this is a turn-based game.

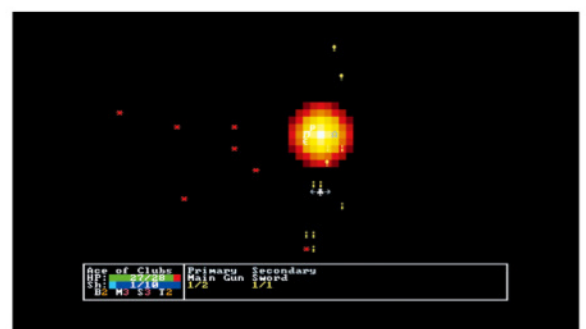
It's pretty satisfying to dodge bullets at your leisure in a turn-based game, as if you've been given the power of (permanent) bullet time. You'll evade homing missiles that are right next to you, and shoot bullets that won't connect for several turns – but when the enemy finally swerves into it, it's all the more rewarding.

Yes, it's all a bunch of ASCII icons, but you begin to see through them relatively quickly, to the pitched space battle happening underneath.

Things do tend to fall apart when the action reaches the very bottom of the screen, as you fight bumping up against the level border. This is a game that does space combat justice, and where you have time to consider your every action. ■

74

BELOW: You can hover over icons for an explanation.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
lagdotcom

LINK
bit.ly/cravespace

Revenants when they discover the cost of dental implants when you go private.



SLAYER CAKE

Revelling in the furious violence of **DOOM**

If you're thankful for nothing else in life, be glad it's me doing this re-review and not the Doom Slayer. I'm going to write 400-ish words of gentle critical analysis. Perhaps I'll come up with a pun for one of the cross-heads. The Doom Slayer, however, would reach out of the magazine and ram your soft face into the score until your skull cracked like a Kinder Egg.

Be glad, then, that in this feature I plan on respecting the sacrosanct boundary between writer and reader. You scan the words, I'll stay on this side of the page. On the face of it, *Doom* is extremely serious business. People are dying. Hell is real.

Humanity is in peril. It's called *Doom*, sometimes in all-caps, for goodness sake. But despite this, it's impossible to take seriously, and, truthfully, I don't think anyone at id Software actually wants me to.

This isn't so much a game as a heavy metal sashay of gigantic guns, swollen forearms, and absurdly violent glory kills. The executions in *Doom* are the sort of thing your dad uses as a metric for excess: at some point, you literally will rip off someone's arm and beat them to death with the

soggy end, which is officially the most extreme form of barbarism one can perpetrate. It's joyous and absurd, as you bounce between demons like a vengeful pinball, plucking out eyeballs and twisting off heads. It makes *Halo's* muscular power fantasy seem nuanced and genteel by comparison.

It's obviously as much about guns as it is about melee combat

ABADDON HOPE

It's obviously as much about guns as it is about melee combat. This is the series that gave us the BFG, after all. And the fact there's

no reload button tells you everything you need to know about *Doom's* furious gunplay. Quieter moments of exploration are punctuated by moments of extreme, chaotic conflict. Weapons have alternate fire options that usually let you sacrifice ammo for an immediate punch of increased

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The most disgustingly brilliant heavy metal music video never made

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
id Software

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/379720/DOOM

effectiveness. And the variety of enemies forces you to keep moving, dashing, strafing and using jump pads to sail above the horned heads of your enemies.

It feels astonishingly fast, especially compared to other choked-up, stop-and-start corridor shooters. If you're standing still in *Doom* you're probably dead. It all makes for a game that manages to feel massively refreshing. The illicit thrill of playing something dangerous and demonic is gone, replaced by an almost cosy sense of familiarity. But it's replaced by pure exhilaration. If there was a Warhammer Chaos God of first-person shooters, this is the sort of game they'd make. There's zero subtlety, limited invention and a story you'll forget while you're playing. But who cares about that when you can shoot through demons with a shotgun and chainsaw through hell's finest with furious abandon? ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Brutal, brisk and entirely bereft of subtlety, *Doom* delivers exactly the punishment demons deserve.

89

BELOW: The reverse shot of Dante reading the tutorial off the floor.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£24

DEVELOPER
Ninja Theory

PUBLISHER
Capcom

CURT ANGEL

DMC: DEVIL MAY CRY remains a sassy surprise

You could turn the opening on *DmC* into a drinking game. It has every trope that has since become synonymous with manufactured cool. There are strewn bras, leftover pizza, bottles of liquor, and exposition via the medium of discarded newspapers. The only danger is that you'd end up as hungover as Dante.

It's interesting going back to *DmC* after the fifth 'proper' *Devil May Cry* game. Ninja Theory's excellent reimagining of the series takes the odd swipe at the original, even throwing in a cheeky gag at the expense of Dante's white hair. But it's kind of like comparing the Libertines to Iron Maiden. *DmC* tries so desperately hard to be cool that it's almost paralysed, like a doomed Tory PM pulling a power pose at a party conference. Meanwhile, Capcom's

sequel is too busy having fun to notice what anyone thinks. It's all pyrotechnics and animatronics and double denim, and it doesn't care how embarrassing it's being.

That's perhaps slightly unfair, because, aching coolness aside, *DmC* is mostly excellent. Back when it was released, the initial shock of the game not being an explosive turd blindsided potential critics. Instead of a disrespectful, dumbed-down Western dilution of a beloved series from a studio with a shaky track record, we got a crisp, swaggy action game that retained much of what made the series great. And it still holds up, even if the story is deliriously clumsy at times. The only problem is that *Devil May Cry 5* feels like it has all the variety and accessibility of *DmC*, but in a package that feels more honest, somehow. ■

81

FIRESTARTER

LITTLE INFERNO brings out the pyromaniac in all of us

Of the many things I've done as a parent, showing my child *Little Inferno* is near the top. Never mind the potential danger of creating a future pyromaniac. Now that she's seen how much fun I have burning toys, my threats finally have some weight behind them.

On the face of it, *Little Inferno* seems like one of those games that feels like it should get boring quickly. You're literally just setting fire to things. But while most of us have gleefully torched paper, wood and maybe even the odd plastic soldier, the true joy here comes when it starts offering the forbidden burnables. Batteries. Televisions. Nests of writhing spiders. Then it becomes an illicit power fantasy. A place where ignoring health and safety or finger-wagging parents won't result in your probable

death. I don't even know or care what actually happens when you set batteries on fire. I just know that I'm not allowed to unless I'm playing *Little Inferno*, and that's why I love this delicious waste of time.

It helps that it comes in a lovely package. The whole thing is underpinned by Vantablack humour; a mix of corporate villainy, pollution and smouldering orphans. And, at the risk of sounding like I'm in a Netflix true crime documentary, I even have a friend who loves burning things more than me. Her name is Sugar Plumps, which is almost certainly one of the names the police discarded before settling on 'Project Yewtree', and we only communicate via mail because you can't set fire to a conversation. Although I'm sure someone who worked on *Little Inferno* considered the possibility. ■

70

BELOW: It's pretty fun burning your own stuff.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£11.40

DEVELOPER
Tomorrow Corporation

PUBLISHER
In-house

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN



URGENT APPEAL



Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is not just a humanitarian crisis for the Ukrainian people; it's a child protection emergency.

Up to 100,000 children warehoused in Ukraine's vast orphanage system – a network of over 700 buildings – risk being forgotten. Left to face the dangers of war alone as staff flee. As families are torn apart or forced from their homes, many more children are at risk of being separated from the love and protection they desperately need. Worse still, they are at risk of trafficking, or being placed in overcrowded, understaffed and poorly resourced orphanages in border countries.

We must act now.

Born out of the Balkans conflict 30 years ago, we've championed the vital importance of family and community-based care of children and our teams are on the ground in Ukraine, Moldova and Romania to ensure this war does not rob children of the love and protection they need now more than ever. Across all three countries, we're directly supporting displaced families and unaccompanied children with material

and emotional support. We're working closely with authorities to keep families together when they are at their most vulnerable and to fight for the safe tracking, monitoring and care for children without parental care. And we won't stop when the fighting stops.

Will you help us by donating?

With your help, we can avert a child protection crisis of epic proportions and ensure children are protected and kept in families. Never orphanages.

To help protect vulnerable children, donate online at: www.hopeandhomes.org/donate. Or call **01722 790 111** Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm.

Please quote **FP22 - G&E** when making your donation.

In the event that funds raised exceed what is needed to deliver Hope and Homes for Children Immediate and longer-term response to this crisis, we will use donations where the need is greatest.

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN



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TECH TALES

Diary of a disastrous malware attack.



GROUP TEST

OLED GAMING MONITORS

OLED technology has arrived on the desktop at last

By Jeremy Laird



A It's been an awfully long time coming. But rejoice, for the OLED revolution has finally made the leap from smartphones and TVs to the PC. You can now choose from a critical mass of gaming-optimised monitors all powered by the latest OLED tech.

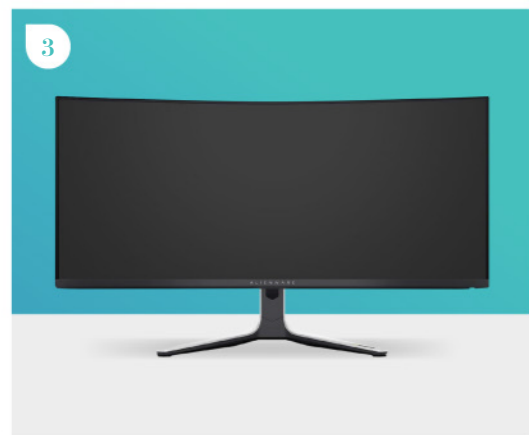
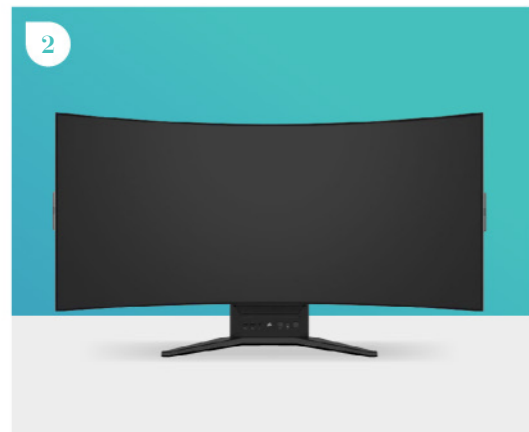
From full 4K resolution and ultrawide aspect ratios to 240Hz refresh and sub-1ms response times, OLED panels certainly tick a lot of

boxes. You can even get an OLED monitor with a flexible screen. But is the technology truly ready for the demands of the PC?

Should you be worried about burn-in and image retention on an OLED PC monitor, for instance? What about peak brightness? Does OLED tech still have a problem lighting up the whole panel?

And if OLED is indeed up to proper PC duty, which of the brave new generation of purpose-built gaming panels should you pick? Time to find out.





Mobius EX480UZ

BENQ £1,600

Bigger isn't always a whole lot better

1 For now, all OLED gaming monitors are derived from HDTV tech. That's why you can only get the full 4K resolution from really large panels like the 48-inch BenQ Mobius EX480UZ.

Honestly, it's too big for a multipurpose desktop monitor. The ergonomics don't work and the pixels are fat and ugly. As something that doubles as a PC gaming monitor and maybe also a console screen, this BenQ only begins to make sense thanks to its combination of both DisplayPort 1.4 and HDMI 2.1 connectivity.

But even so, the LG-sourced OLED panel lacks punch next to

any premium LCD monitor. It just doesn't work as well as the Samsung QD-OLED competition in a PC context. The HDR performance is decent in darker game scenes, but the more of the panel you light up, the less punch it has.

In the end, features like the bundled IR remote and better integrated speakers than usual for a PC monitor aren't enough to offset the fact that you can get a similarly-specced 120Hz 4K OLED TV for way less money.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- The real 4K deal
- Nice feature set
- Limited full-screen brightness

SPECS SIZE: 48-INCH / PANEL TYPE: LG WOLED / RESOLUTION: 3840 X 2160 / REFRESH: 120HZ

Xeneon Flex 45WQHD240

CORSAIR £2,100

Corsair's flexible panel tech comes at a painful price

2 You'd better *really* like the Corsair Xeneon Flex 45WQHD240's bendy OLED panel tech, because it's hard to see what else justifies the price tag.

This Corsair 45-inch OLED monitor runs the same 3440 x 1440 native res as the 34-inch ultrawide competition. The net result is much bigger pixels on such a big panel. That's suboptimal on the Windows desktop, though less of an issue actually in game.

However, what certainly will bother you when you fire up, say, *Cyberpunk 2077* running with full HDR reheated enabled, is the Flex's weedy full screen brightness. It's

very disappointing. It doesn't really even sizzle as much as you'd hope in darker game scenes with smaller light sources.

OK, the pixel response is outrageously fast and the 240Hz refresh makes for very low latency. But for almost any money, let alone this lofty price point, the panel simply lacks drama and fizz. So, it's nice to have the option of bending the Xeneon Flex or leaving it flat. But \$2,000 worth of nice? That'll be a big, fat no.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Flexible panel tech
- Very fast
- Disappointing panel brightness

SPECS SIZE: 45-INCH / PANEL TYPE: LG WOLED / RESOLUTION: 3440 X 1440 / REFRESH: 240HZ



GROUP TEST

4

AW3423DW

ALIENWARE £1,099

The first and still one of the best OLED monitors

3 This is it, the daddy, the first true OLED gaming monitor. We were pretty blown away by the Alienware AW3423DW when we first saw it over a year ago, and not a lot has changed. This is still a stunning monitor.

It runs Samsung's QD-OLED tech, so full-screen brightness is no problem. More to the point, the HDR performance is pretty epic, with one proviso. A matte anti-glare coating slightly undermines the OLED panel's perfect black levels, which is a pity. Still, we also love the 34-inch ultrawide aspect ratio, it's just so immersive

compared to a plain old 16:9 panel. Then there's the epic response you get with all OLED monitors and the low latency thanks to a 175Hz refresh.

OK, there are monitors with higher refresh. But that's quick enough for most needs short of pro esports. No, our main objection is the painful pricing, which is partly a factor of full Nvidia G-Sync Ultimate support, which costs plenty but doesn't actually add all that much.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Gorgeous ultrawide OLED panel
- No brightness issues
- Too pricey versus the competition

SPECS SIZE: 34-INCH / PANEL TYPE: SAMSUNG QD-OLED / RESOLUTION: 3440 X 1440 / REFRESH: 175HZ

AW3423DWF

ALIENWARE £929

This is as good as OLED gaming currently gets

4 Add a single letter, save £200. That's the Alienware AW3423DWF for you, cheaper sibling to the full-spec Alienware AW3423DW. But what are you giving up?

Actually, almost nothing, just the mostly pointless Nvidia G-Sync module and 10Hz of refresh rate. That's a downtuning of the spec to 165Hz that we suspect is mostly symbolic. Whatever, what you do keep is the fabulous Samsung QD-OLED 34-inch ultrawide panel in all its HDR glory.

Goodness, it's gorgeous. What's more, it actually looks better in this cheaper Alienware 'F' model thanks to a glossy

coating. That really brings out those black levels at the same time as letting that quantum-dot brightness do its thing.

Overall, there are few compromises, especially compared to alternatives with brightness-challenged LG panels, and loads to like, from incredible pixel speed to fantastic HDR punch. Overall, it's just what we've been hoping for from OLED tech and, for now at least, probably the best OLED gaming monitor on the market.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Epic ultrawide OLED experience
- Punchy full-screen brightness
- Cheaper than the G-Sync version

SPECS SIZE: 34-INCH / PANEL TYPE: SAMSUNG QD-OLED / RESOLUTION: 3440 X 1440 / REFRESH: 165HZ



PHILIPS HAS DITCHED
THE NVIDIA G-SYNC
MODULE AND SWAPPED
IN A USB-C PORT WITH
POWER DELIVERY



GO FOR THE BURN

Burn-in is the biggest worry when it comes to OLED technology. It happens because the red, green and blue subpixels in OLED panels wear out at slightly different rates.

Of course, you won't care about the specifics if you find a ghostly shadow of the Windows taskbar etched into the bottom of your pricey OLED panel. You'll just wonder where the money went.

For now, there's no definitive verdict. Only two companies make the actual panels that go into OLED monitors: LG and Samsung. And there are some indications that LG's WOLED tech is slightly more burn-in resistant than Samsung's QD-OLED.

If you're particularly worried, then, go for a monitor with an LG panel. But all the options here are covered by a burn-in guarantee for a few years. So, there's no immediate cause for concern.

Evnia 34M2C8600

PHILIPS £1,150

Philips has gone glossy and it makes all the difference

5 OLED monitors are surely synonymous with cutting edge technology. Right now, it's the ultimate screen tech, right? Probably. But it's a surprisingly old-school feature that most impressed us about the Philips Evnia 34M2C8600. Yup, it's the glossy screen coating. And it makes all the difference compared to the matte coating on the Alienware AW3423DWF.

Admittedly, Alienware has since added the AW3423DWF to its lineup, which is also glossy. But it was Philips that first proved how it maximises the contrast and black levels. That glossy coating really lets

OLED panel tech sing. Elsewhere, you get a full 175Hz refresh and zippy pixel response, all wrapped up in an essentially identical 34-inch ultrawide package. But Philips has ditched the Nvidia G-Sync module and swapped in a USB-C port with power delivery.

The latter arguably isn't hugely relevant for gaming. So we'd opt for the cheaper 'F'-spec Alienware. But this Philips Evnia is still a super-sweet screen.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- OLED screen tech done right
- Glossy coating makes a difference
- Expensive

SPECS SIZE: 34-INCH / PANEL TYPE: SAMSUNG QD-OLED / RESOLUTION: 3440 X 1440 / REFRESH: 175HZ

Xeneon 27QHD240

CORSAIR £949

Corsair's 1440p OLED panel lacks pizzazz

6 A thousand quid or very likely thereabouts is an awful lot for a 27-inch 1440p monitor. But such are the extremes of OLED tech, you can actually have a 48-inch 4K model from Gigabyte for less.

Of course, this Corsair monitor gets newer LG OLED panel tech. That does help a little with full-screen brightness. But the 27QHD240 still lacks punch. For sure, it's well behind screens with Samsung's QD-OLED tech for brightness, never mind an LCD monitor with a turbocharged mini-LED backlight. Still, the black levels are impeccable and the

combination of 240Hz refresh and that signature OLED pixel speed makes for an outrageously pacey monitor. Speaking of which, the modest 2,560 x 1,440 res does at least mean that it's much easier to achieve those ultra-high frame rates than with a full 4K monitor.

It's just at this price point, 27 inches just doesn't feel terribly impressive. It's a good monitor, this Corsair Xeneon. We just want something a bit more dramatic for this much money.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Super speedy pixels
- 240Hz refresh
- Lacks just a little punch

SPECS SIZE: 27-INCH / PANEL TYPE: LG WOLED / RESOLUTION: 2560 X 1440 / REFRESH: 240HZ

Experts predict
that by 2033 it'll
hit a stable 50fps.

GIANT STEPS

What will **PC GRAPHICS** look like in ten years?

Look back down from the summit of Mount PC Gaming in 2023 to the base camp of 2013, and you'll see quite a view. *BioShock Infinite*, *Battlefield 4*, *Metro: Last Light* and their bloom-soaked ilk were objects of life-affirming beauty in their day. They were the reasons we bought new graphics cards. And now look at them! A bunch of silly old garbage. What was the point in even making them, eh, Ken Levine?

As much as time's stripped away the lustrous sheen from 2013's triple-As, when you look back at them what's striking is that the way PC graphics have evolved in the intervening decade has been pretty linear. That is to say, we've seen a continued refinement of the same techniques developers used back then – cheaper anti-aliasing with better image quality, more efficient texture streaming, smarter procedural generation, resource-friendly HBAO.

Native resolutions crept up slowly and 4K became less of a niche, but that hasn't fundamentally changed the way our games look today. Ray tracing and AI-powered rendering techniques like DLSS and FSR have been the only notable disruptive techs in that time, opening the door to big leaps forward in specific areas (in the case of ray tracing, that area was the neon-lit puddles that have found their way into every game since 2019, no matter how shoehorned). So although

the graphics of 2023's most expensive PC productions look significantly higher in fidelity than their forefathers did a decade ago, the really big disruptive tech breakthroughs have been few and far between. If you don't agree, consider what 1993 looked like in PC gaming compared to 2003. Cheers for that one, polygons. The decade ahead, though, looks like a very different proposition.

START YOUR ENGINES

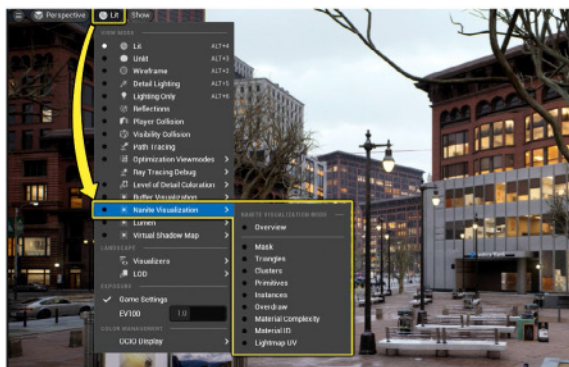
With Unreal Engine 5's arrival and the particular advantages some of its tools bring to developers, we stand dangerously close to the railings of Uncanny Valley right now. Earlier in the year *Unrecord* had the entire gaming community questioning reality. It was as though we were the kid in the noughties viral video, and indie developer Drama was the dental anaesthetic. The muted lighting. The fisheye, GoPro-style camera perspective. It was all just a bit too real for comfort. In fact, a sufficient number of naysayers questioned the authenticity of *Unrecord*'s gameplay trailer for developer Alexandre Spindler to post a clip of the game running in UE5 to Twitter. "For those who thought *Unrecord* was fake or a video," he wrote, "sorry." Steady on, mate. They all laughed at Christopher Columbus too, but at least he didn't come back from the New World kissing his biceps and dabbing.

How is *Unrecord* pulling off such realism? How did The *Matrix Awakens* demo make such a leap forward for fidelity,



Why no 8K?

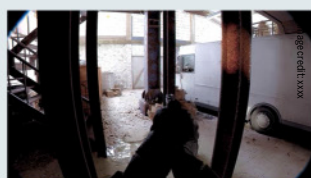
Given the industry's focus on increasing resolutions over the past 20 years, one might wonder why there's no discernible push for 8K gaming currently. The reasons are twofold: it doesn't look much better than 4K to our fallible human eyes, and we haven't even managed to make 4K the default yet.



FAR LEFT: UE5's Nanite brings huge static meshes into game worlds without getting bottlenecked by the CPU.

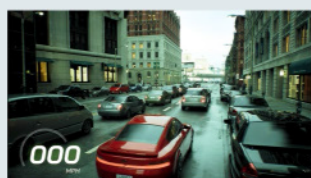
LEFT: 2013: a bad year for anyone with a fear of clouds, twins, or highfalutin endings.

SHORT CIRCUIT *Four PC games that look like they're visiting from the future*



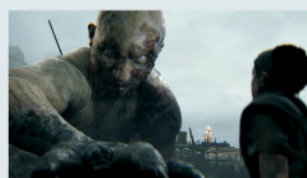
UNRECORD

So good that it sparked mass incredulity from all who gazed upon it. Surely this is just actual police bodycam footage?



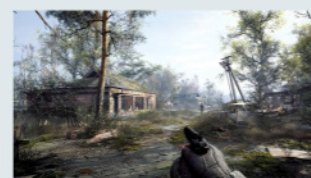
THE MATRIX AWAKENS

The demo itself never made it to PC, but you can still download the UE5 project and marvel at its details.



HELLBLADE 2

No one's going to mistake an enormous giant for reality, but the fidelity in Ninja Theory's upcoming project is amazing.



STALKER 2

The dour wastelands surrounding a power plant where decades earlier a tragedy took place never looked so good.

too? It's not just that GPUs are bigger and tougher. The industry's getting incredibly, fearsomely smart at actually using the compute power we have locally.

Nanite, for example, a meshlet-based streaming technique for UE5, allows the developer to stream in huge static meshes – we're talking billions upon billions of triangles – directly from storage to VRAM. With the CPU and system RAM taken out of the process, that makes it much kinder to our system resources to render scenes comprised of extremely high-resolution photogrammetry, leading to photorealistic landscapes, an easier job for designers, and more of our system resources to spend elsewhere. In the next decade it's certainly likely we'll see texture streaming handling not just static meshes but dynamic scenery too, transferring directly from your M.2 drive to your GPU's VRAM.

The major advancements of the last decade – ray tracing and AI-led rendering – will definitely play a part in shaping the look of 2033's best visuals too. We've recently seen ray tracing morph into path tracing, essentially the same technique but more efficient and thus less resource-intensive. Where ray tracing plots the course of a ray from the camera to every pixel of a scene's geometry, and every subsequent reflection and refraction from that point until the ray hits a light source, path tracing simplifies the process.

It fires off random rays from every pixel, and only pays attention again when one of those rays bounces off something else. Both techniques are doing the same thing, but ray tracing's putting a lot of resources into plotting the courses of rays that don't impact the scene's overall look,

whereas path tracing focuses only on those rays. It takes a lot more complex mathematics and Monte Carlo equations to do it, but asks a lot less of your GPU. Looking forward, that means path tracing has the capability over the next decade to deliver those 'movie CG-like' scenes we've heard so much about since ray tracing burst onto the scene circa 2018.

DO ANDROIDS DREAM?

The real ace up the industry's sleeve, though, is neural rendering. Already useable in its infancy, Nvidia's brainchild allows developers to 'feed' imagery to a neural AI and prompt it to generate a perceptron that can be used as a brand new 3D asset. To put it another way, you show the AI a bunch of references you'd like your asset to look similar to, and it 'imagines' a completely new object, complete with geometry and textures.

The ramifications of that tech can't be overstated in game design. It's a

machine for turning imaginary images into digital reality with the utmost efficiency, an original object slot machine. How much time will that save designers over the next decade, and with so many fewer obstacles between their visions and an in-game asset, what will game worlds feel like to occupy when they're populated in this way? We simply can't imagine yet. And that's the whole point – the emerging tech we're seeing in 2023 looks truly transformative. Not just 'less bloom, more HBAO, make it 4K'. A new pipeline for conceptualising, populating and rendering virtual worlds. If we don't look back on *Jedi Survivor*'s graphics in 2033 and fall about laughing, the industry will have failed to Sherpa us up the next peak. ■

Phil Iwanik

WE'VE RECENTLY SEEN RAY TRACING MORPH INTO PATH TRACING

GOING VIRAL

Diary of a disastrous **MALWARE ATTACK**, 2006 style

It's 7pm on a hazy June evening in my atrocious student house. Supercharged by a diet rich in Tangfastics and a supermarket Red Bull alternative, we spent the first part of the evening playing a particularly destructive indoor cricket match. But now it's time for us all to settle down and write the personal and academic development essays we've been putting off for 11 months. The deadline is, after all, tomorrow.

7.15pm. Hmm. *Need For Speed: Most Wanted* was running a bit slow just then during my pre-essay warmup car chase. And I don't remember quite this much pornography being on my desktop, browser homepage and bookmarks. It's probably nothing. Better get on with that essay.

7.28pm. Yep, something's definitely not right with *Need For Speed*. It wasn't struggling that much to render all the spoilers on my Audi TT last night. Something's definitely not right. I should write that essay though.

8.45pm: No, we all did the right thing there. We were all too amped up on taurine to concentrate on our essays and to be fair that second game of indoor cricket did help to disperse some of that energy. I feel ready now, though. Ready to write a bloody good essay. Let's do it. Let's write an essay.

8.46pm: Oh right, yeah. My computer's knackered.

CRISIS TALKS

8.47pm: A bit of further inspection reveals just how knackered. I can technically still connect to the internet – that's a good thing. My bedroom has the only internet connection in the house, so we'll all need to use my PC to submit our work. But while notionally connected, the internet's operating so slowly, so glacially, agonisingly slowly, that no web pages actually load without timing out. The porn pop-ups are working fine, though.

This new development has dire ramifications for the personal and academic development of us all who dwell in 78 Triangle North. There's a lot on the line here, and I need to get this problem fixed with enough time to a) write 3,000 words about what I want to achieve in life and how I intend to go about it (of course, I'll need to decide those things first) and then b) let my four housemates load their insightful and well-reasoned life plans onto my PC via their USB sticks, connect to our uni's intranet, and submit them online.

9.00pm: I'm thinking back now, and I think I know what's

happened. I was trying to download a hooky copy of a game from one of those sites. You know the ones – ASCII art of a cannabis leaf at the top of the page, some form of diss aimed at a rival hacker collective at the bottom of it, hooky download links somewhere in the middle. Like a living parable about why videogame piracy is a terrible thing, I clicked some of those links and am now

suffering the consequences. My personal computer has become infected by malware.

9.01pm: I run an AVG scan. Only the free version, mind you, but it should catch any digital miscreants. It's anti-virus software, right? That's what it's for.

9.10pm: Right. I can see the problem now. AVG has identified over 300 threats, and gives an ETA of eight hours until it completes this scan. I pause the scan, quarantine the threats it's identified so far, then restart my PC and, with fingers crossed, hope for the best.

FINAL COUNTDOWN

9.12pm: Yeah, that's a lot, lot worse now. It seems I've quarantined some fairly vital system files from within the Windows install directory. Icons have gone missing. Windows explorer keeps closing and restarting, to the extent that it's now impossible to even load AVG back up and give it the full eight-hour scan. It's time to break the news to my mates: our personal and academic development is on hold.

8.46PM: OH RIGHT, YEAH. MY COMPUTER'S KNACKERED



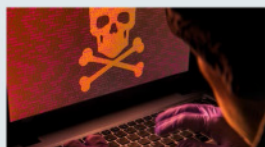
PHIL IWANIK
Thank goodness Phil scraped that 2:1 in Creative Studies in English, or else we wouldn't have allowed his barely publishable copy into the elite world of print media.

DOWN WITH THE SICKNESS *Four ways your PC could become infected in 2006*



PIRATED GAMES

Attempts to illegally download ripped games were almost always rewarded with a surprise virus in the noughties. Those were the rules. Everyone understood them. And yet still did it.



LOW BITRATE SCREAMO MP3S

It wasn't just games we wanted to enjoy without paying for. Music piracy was also a thing, and was frequently seasoned with a little malware. Serves you right.



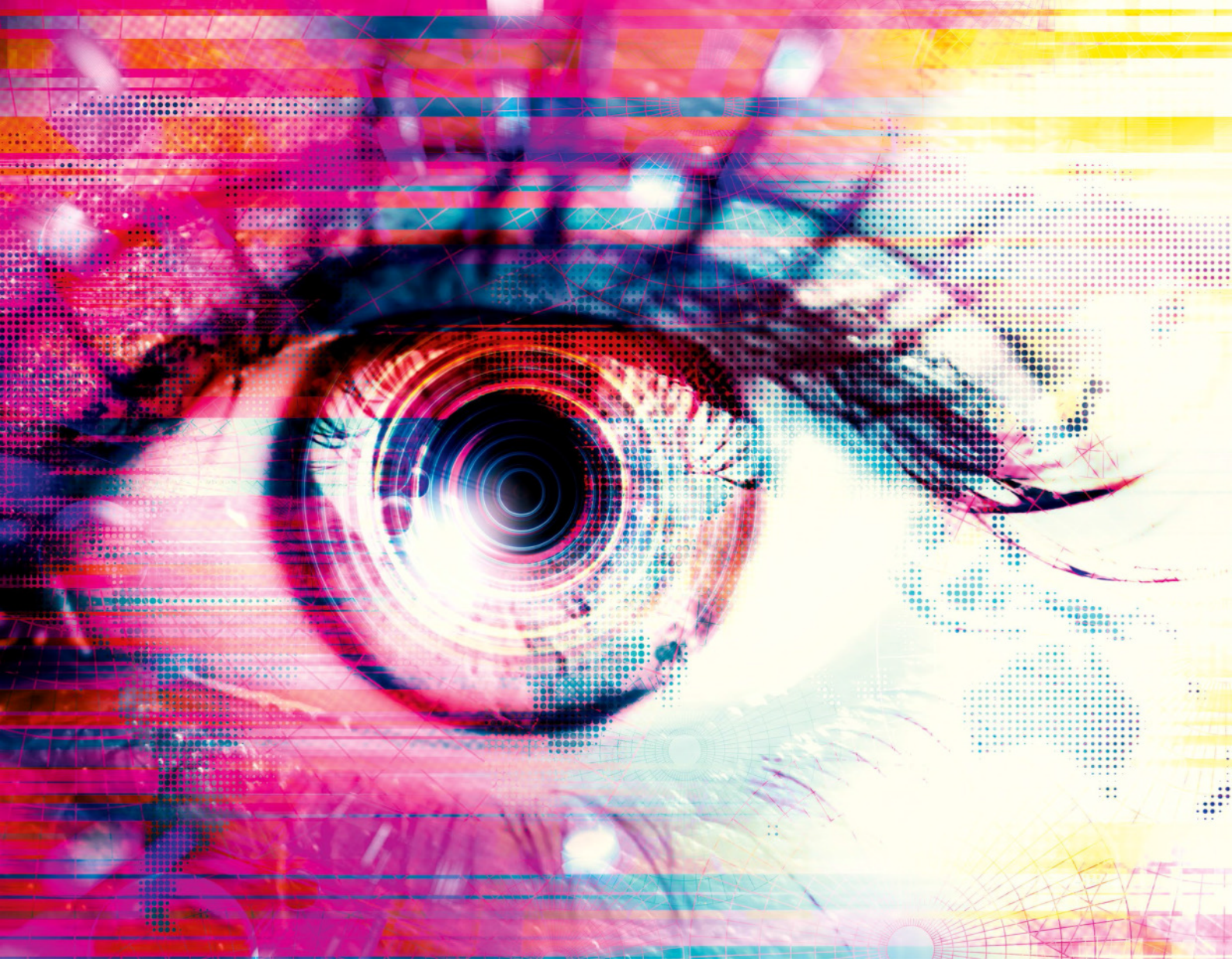
JOINING THE BLACK PARADE

Among the lesser known causes of Windows malware attacks was swearing allegiance to My Chemical Romance, the saviours of the broken and the damned.



QUOTING THE MIGHTY BOOSH

You won't find any record of this happening, but blithely parroting lines from Julian Barratt and Noel Fielding's wacky comedy show meant instant malware.



11.45pm: That was one of the most forlorn games of indoor cricket I've ever been a part of.

8.00am: I've got a plan. With my PC out of action, the house is completely without internet access, which means none of us can Google the problem. So it's scorched earth time: I need to reinstall Windows from scratch. The contents of my HDD are bigger than any flash drive on the market, so I need to buy 16 DVD-ROMs and painstakingly burn everything I want to keep onto them. PC World opens at 9am. While I'm there, I'll also need to buy a brand new copy of Windows XP for hundreds of pounds because this was an OEM PC and I don't have the master disks. Cool. Cool cool cool.

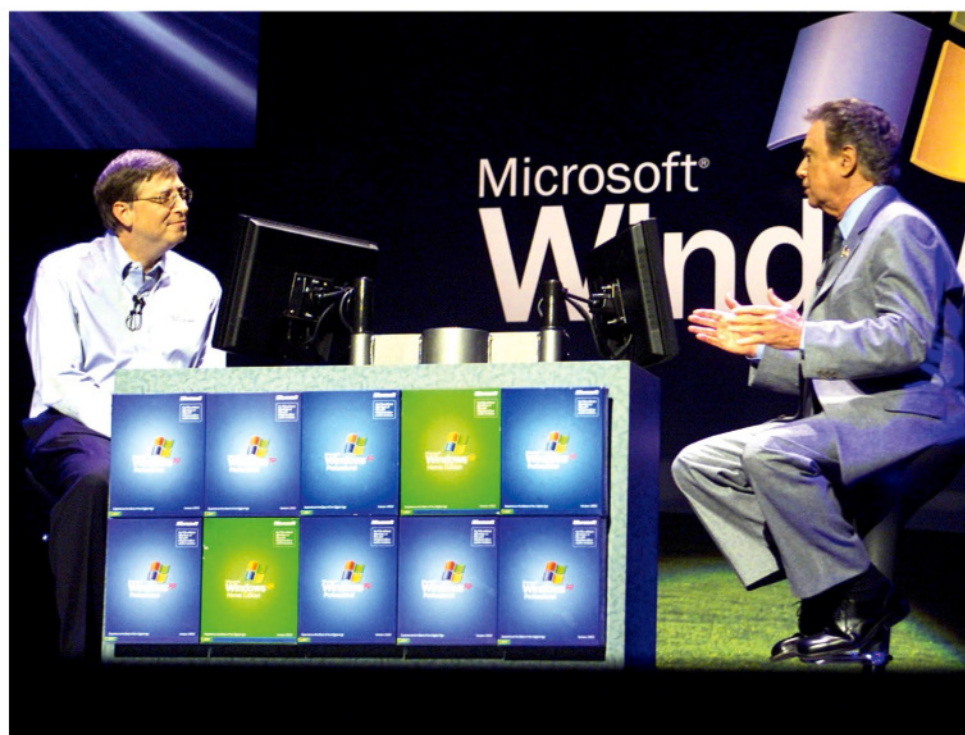
4.00pm: It's done. Hundreds of pounds poorer, and with 16 DVDs of MSN chat logs and iTunes library files to show for it, my PC works again and our house has internet access. At long last, we can all start those essays.

7.00pm: That's much better. *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*'s running smooth as you like again. Who's for a Red Rooster? ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: It might not have held your files to ransom for Bitcoin, but 2006's malware stung hard.

BELOW: "I'll take ten copies please, Mr Gates. My search history's pretty... exotic."



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

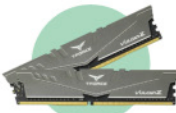
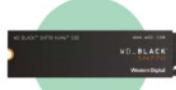
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£973

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £115 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £210 Intel's added four more cores to its entry-level Core i5 and it's become even more fantastic value.
GRAPHICS CARD		Arc A750 Intel £230 You get a lot of graphics card for your money with Intel's Arc A750. Great for 1080p gaming.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £45 Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200.
POWER SUPPLY		Pylon 450 XPG £45 With an RX 6600 in tow we can get away with a 450W PSU, and the Pylon is just that.
SSD		WD Black SN770 500GB Western Digital £38 It's finally time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive even in a budget machine such as this.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – it's perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,631

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £180 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £210 Yes, this is the same CPU as the budget build. It's simply too good value to miss and perfect for high fps gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 6700 XT AMD £390 Price cuts have made this graphics card the one to beat at 1440p.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £Free Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 13th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB DDR4-3200 Corsair £45 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		WD Black SN770 1TB Western Digital £70 There are faster PCIe 4.0 drives, but this is the best value for money SSD around.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		H7 NZXT £120 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		S2722DGM Dell £260 With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,445

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z790 Carbon WiFi MSI £483 This MSI motherboard brings the latest chipset to bear without going overboard on excessive features.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 13900K Intel £589 This is the best all-round processor money can buy. It's a little overkill, but that's what this build is all about.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Founders Ed Nvidia £1,699 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB G.Skill £188 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		WD Black SN850X 2TB Western Digital £167 WD makes a mean PCIe 4.0 SSD, and the SN850X is its best to date.
DATA DRIVE		Crucial P5 Plus 2TB Crucial £177 This isn't as fast as our boot drive, but it'll more than suffice for storing heaps of games.
CASE		5000D Corsair £155 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		34 QD-OLED (AW3423DW) Alienware £1,099 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £185 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“It turns out that I do not enjoy being chased by big scary fish”

You can find the perfect mix of relaxation and fear in **DREDGE**

After months of casting spells, avoiding being eaten alive by zombies and slicing up bad guys with a lightsaber, I was hoping to find some calm and relaxation in *Dredge*, a singleplayer fishing adventure game. What I should have done was read the next line which also described it as having a “sinister undercurrent” which made it just as stressful as the bigger RPGs I was trying to get away from. While much shorter in length than the other games I’m playing, it’s still necessary for me to fish around for sidequests, talk to weirdos, travel around (without fast travel or set navigation points) and fetch things for people.

Dredge washes you up on a series of islands where you need to rebuild and respect your boat for all sorts of

▶ LAUREN AITKEN



THIS MONTH
I crashed my boat a lot.

ALSO PLAYED
Star Wars Jedi: Survivor, *Mass Effect Legendary Edition*

fishing mishaps, so you can sell your goods and restore the economy. Instead, you find yourself catching bizarre fish from the deep with horrible mutations, long-lost trinkets from sailors who fared far worse than you, and mystery that results in death and eldritch horror. Just what you need after a long day of saving the world, eh?

The main story has you uncover the journals of a newly-married woman JJ and meet an interesting fellow called the Collector. While hunting for items, treasures and

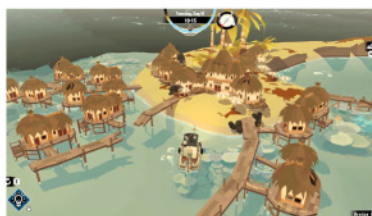
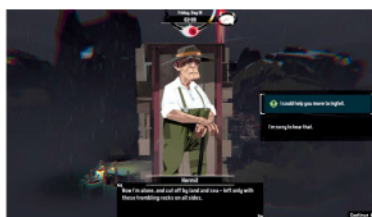
TOP: You’re gonna need a bigger boat.

journals, and speaking with all of the various weird and wonderful locals, the mystery of what happened to JJ will slowly unravel, and you’ll have two endings to choose from. As you might suspect by now, they both involve death by giant sea creatures, though it’s up to you to interpret which is the more cataclysmic ending.

REEL SCARY FISH

If you’re not bothered by the story and just want to keep upgrading your boat to catch more fish, then *Dredge* is pretty relaxing. Of course, you can only avoid the story so much, mostly

ONE CHOMPY BOY TURNS THE WATER PINK AS IT CHASES YOU IN THE NIGHT



The ominous pink glow of death.

because your dinky little boat cannot outrun the scary big fish on a basic engine alone. It turns out that I do not enjoy being chased by big scary fish – one particularly chompy boy turns the water pink as it chases you in the night, making things all the more ominous. Then there's the unsettling minor chord jingle that plays when you catch a mutated fish – this kind of horror isn't for me. It also turns out that I am not especially adept at fishing or talking to people, as the inhabitants of Greater Marrow and the other islands seem constantly annoyed at me, bored at my attempts at conversing with them, or downright alarmed by my presence, prompting me to ask: what am I good at? Building fast boats, sounding my foghorn at all hours of the day and night yet inevitably crashing into rocks, it seems.

Despite not being an eldritch horror fish enjoyer, I have put almost 20 hours into *Dredge* and I am looking forward to the upcoming DLC that will let me set waypoints and comes with a new photo mode so that I can capture my misfortune and use it as a screensaver. Until then, I will fish during the day, sleep at night, and enjoy my tidy profit from selling little fish. ■



Things might get busy in *Schildmaid DX*, but it's all founded on tremendously elegant, thoughtful design.

“A chance to be experimental”

Reframing difficulty with **SCHILDMAID MX**

▶ WILL FREEMAN



THIS MONTH
Tried to collide with bullets to succeed in a shmup.

ALSO PLAYED
Dead End City, Terra Flame

Approaching the learning curve that a modern shmup offers up can often feel like running full speed at the foot of a cliff face.

It's not just the infamous difficulty those tightly packed bullet patterns present. There's also profound mechanical complexity to overcome. Because in truth, to experience the real thrill of a 2D shooter is to interact with a furiously elaborate scoring system built from intersecting multipliers and combo metres, all while edging your way through tiny gaps in the ordnance barrage.

Alas, all that can make the genre the opposite of welcoming. There are easy modes out there, of course. Too often, though, in dropping enemy and bullet numbers they leave less to interact with, undermining exploration of the scoring system.

Schildmaid MX, which recently debuted on Steam, achieves something remarkable, delivering a 2D shooter that has all the challenge, depth, and complexity a genre obsessive could want. But thanks to brilliantly sharp design, it equally excels in welcoming less experienced

players to the authentic shmup experience. And even though I've given a couple of decades of genre devotion to my shmup skills, that's why I can't put it down.

OUR TYPE

Taking the form of an unrelenting horizontal shmup, *Schildmaid MX* blends the old school flavour of classics with the energy and intricacy of modern arcade purebreds. A range of modes bring distinct variants of the core game, with a lot going on in each. Learning to deliberately collide with bullets to build shield, manage weapon meters and point multipliers, and know when not to shoot to let greater scoring opportunities build is a delight to explore.

Now, I'm no genre maestro, but I can trouble *Schildmaid MX*'s more testing arrangements. And yet I can't stop returning to Jaeger mode. Because seeing what's possible within a scoring system decoupled from difficulty makes for a refreshing change. It's a chance to be experimental and find new ways to trouble the broad genre. *Schildmaid MX* is a shmup for all people informed by knowledge of schmups, and a perfect gateway to the genre. ■



“Cassette Beasts absolutely will not let me drift into auto-pilot”

CASSETTE BEASTS is a surprisingly sick Pokémon remix

I don't get on with turn-based battles the way I did as a kid. The fear of level grinding and strict type charts has kept me away from recent Pokémon-like creature catching games like *Temtem*, but something about *Cassette Beasts* made me give it a chance. I'm quite glad I did.

In *Cassette Beasts* you wash up on the beach of a strange island where you're one of many castaways all hailing from slightly different realities. You'll do battle with wild monsters in New Wirral by transforming yourself into creatures you've recorded on tapes – the foundation of the concept that *Cassette Beasts* is entirely committed to with healing items called rewinds, skills called stickers and evolutions called remasters. I can't believe it missed the trick on referring to monster fusions as 'remixes' though.

MONSTER MIXTAPES

In the tradition of *Pokémon* and others in this genre, each creature has a type: the standard fire, water, earth and air, non-elementals like

▶ LAUREN MORTON



THIS MONTH
Transformed into an emo sheep ghost.

ALSO PLAYED
Roots of Pacha

plastic and poison, and weirder categories like glass and glitter. But managing which monsters are best against others is way more complex than just matching fire against plants.

Using a poison attack against a metal monster will coat its surfaces so that it inflicts poison damage for several turns. Using fire against a water type will cover it in a healing steam. My leech attack against a poison creature will deal me damage each turn instead of healing.

It's all way too much to remember off the top of my head and although that's initially intimidating, *Cassette*

Beasts' UI helpfully shows symbols when I'm considering an attack target to remind me which effects I'm about to trigger. Though I grinded through *Pokémon* as a kid, as an adult I've found I typically put down turn-based RPGs around the time that random battles let me turn my brain off. *Cassette Beasts* will not let me drift into auto-pilot so I'm nowhere near getting bored.

Cassette Beasts does away with my other turn-based nemesis too: the dreaded level grind. Every new monster I record is just an extension of myself and my own character level, so there's no time wasted waiting for a new acquisition to benefit from XP sharing to level up.

Cassette Beasts is endearingly weird. Not *Undertale*-level weird – at least not from the hours I've put in so far – but things are not at all what they seem in New Wirral. I quite quickly encountered its archangels and not long after was off to meet some kind of cult one of my party members had escaped from. Oh, and then there's the vampire landlords. I expect things are only going to get fishier in New Wirral as I fight my way towards escaping. ■

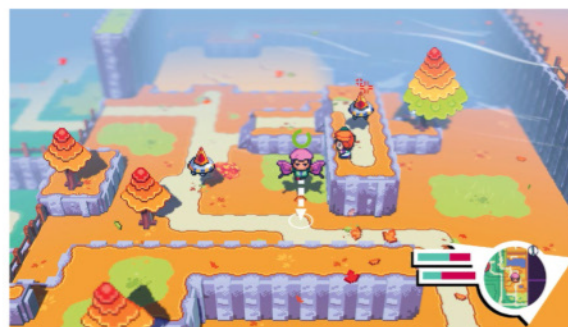
MANAGING WHICH MONSTERS ARE BEST AGAINST OTHERS IS WAY MORE COMPLEX



Cassette Beasts blends pixel visuals and realistic lighting effects.



LEFT: Be careful who you attempt to poison.



BELOW: You can also glide around the world as you explore.



Sulik is mad but hits hard with his sledgehammer.

“Natasha whips out her pistol and starts firing blindly”

Maybe playing a bookish smartypants in **FALLOUT 2** was a mistake

The setting is post-apocalyptic America, deep within a series of dark and dank ancient mining tunnels running under Klamath, a two-bit town filled with nothing more than a community of trappers and their homes, a seedy inn, and a constantly busy brothel.

And I, Natasha, a small-framed, bookish, yet strangely charismatic young woman and her drug-addled tribal warrior companion, Sulik, are knee-deep in giant rats who are trying to gnaw our feet off and are being prevented from doing so by being smashed into chowders of bloody guts by Sulik's sledgehammer.

We're on a quest to rid Klamath of its plague of rats, which have been emanating from these mining tunnels, and it's going well. Sulik has been smashing rats left, right and centre, and so far I've not had to lift a finger, relying on my brawny companion to do the murdering.

That's because I built Natasha to be a non-violent type, who would get

ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Realised the pistol is mightier than the pen.

ALSO PLAYED
Star Wars Jedi: Survivor, *Black & White 2*

by in the harsh post-apocalyptic world through diplomacy, charisma and, when needs be, by picking the odd lock or two.

KILL KEENG RA'AT

In the heart of the tunnels Sulik and I find a monstrous albino mole rat who refers to himself as Keeng Ra'at and is far from happy that we've been making ratatouille out of his rat worshippers. Unfortunately, my high charisma and intelligence scores are no good here, and the rotund and

rabid rodent launches into an attack on us, lashing out at Natasha.

Sulik steps in just in time and brings the sledgehammer crashing down on the rat king's mutated head, doing some massive damage.

What do they say about pride coming before a fall? Keeng Ra'at then launches multiple swiping attacks on Sulik and while the first misses, the second hits with a critical, breaking his right arm. Sulik can now no longer wield his two-handed sledgehammer and, weaponless, he starts to flee down the tunnels, leaving me alone with Keeng.

The Keeng is almost dead, but now Natasha is going to have to finish the job. She whips out her pistol and starts firing blindly, missing the rat god repeatedly. She's a lover (of books) not a fighter. Keeng keeps advancing, landing blow after blow until, just as Natasha is about to become chowder herself, one of her stray bullets ricochets off a mining cart and blows the Keeng's head off. Maybe I under-rat-ed (sorry not sorry) the need for Natasha to have a bit of combat prowess after all. ■

THE KEENG IS ALMOST DEAD, BUT NOW NATASHA IS GOING TO HAVE TO FINISH THE JOB



DREAD DELUSION

Dread Delusion is great, it's just hard playing it piecemeal. *By Ted Litchfield*

Dread Delusion vexes me. It's maybe the perfect game for me, one I really want to keep digging into, but like other Early Access games before it, *Dread Delusion* might be too good to play unfinished. I've come to the conclusion I can't keep playing it in Early Access. You play it now if you haven't, precisely once, but then you gotta wait.

Like *Disco Elysium*, this first-person, open-world RPG does a phenomenal job of hinting at a much larger world from the perspective of an utter backwater. You're a recently released prisoner exploring the Oneiric Isles, a collection of asteroids orbiting a remote, blood-red star in a medieval society that took to the skies in magical airships after an ancient calamity on the planet below.

Dread Delusion mashes an alien world with the comfortable trappings of fantasy roleplaying to great effect. It's a shattered landscape under a blood-red sky with the 'neuron star' hovering uncomfortably close by, but that landscape is dotted with wattle and daub ye olde buildings inhabited by cor-blimey peasants. The airships are made of wood and piloted by pointy-hatted wizards, while the classic fantasy inquisition is being

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
March 24, 2023

DEVELOPER
Lovely Hellplace

PUBLISHER
DreadXP

LINK
bit.ly/41fRC1R

waged by atheists hunting down the last meddling gods.

After releasing into Early Access last summer, *Dread Delusion* has received updates inching it ever closer to 1.0. The biggest, *The Emberian Update*, adds more material to the game's main quest, introducing the first members of an NPC crew you assemble to take on a dangerous fugitive with utopian dreams.

And you know what? The quest rocks. Most of *Dread Delusion*'s meatier content so far has focused on dialogue and exploration, but developer Lovely Hellplace has really flexed its dungeon crawling muscles, narrowing in on what I crave out of an Ayleid ruin or Dwemer city. The newly added, bandit-ridden town of Rustberg is almost like an FPS level dropped into *Dread Delusion*'s open world. It has a verticality I always appreciate, this sharp climb through raggedy, empty houses doing battle with bandits through *Dread Delusion*'s recently-improved melee combat and expanded ranged arsenal.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Dread Delusion also continues to excel at offering *Deus Ex*-style multiple choice problem solving based on your build. The road up to Rustberg is infested with hostile goblins, and while you could always just hack your way through, creative solutions present themselves. Passing a persuasion check on a nearby roustabout reveals that there's an invisible bridge around the rear of the town. Drinking a special perception potion will reveal it to you, allowing you to pass over the scarlet void below, but you could also always cut the Gordian knot: just cast the super speed spell and jump over the gap.

I like a bit of classic dungeon



EXCELS AT OFFERING MULTIPLE CHOICE PROBLEM SOLVING

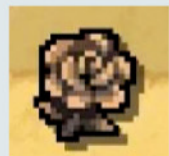
crawling to contrast with the philosophical, dialogue-heavy stuff, but I can't praise the story-heavy missions it launched with enough. One of them involves retrieving a cursed idol from an airship doing doughnuts in a far-off corner of the map, and it's a masterclass in great storytelling with relatively few resources. There's another one where you have to investigate the truth behind a zombie civilisation's "ethically-sourced" humanlike meat, and it ends with one of the most affecting ethical dilemmas I've ever faced in a videogame.

But I just can't keep playing *Dread Delusion* like this – it's already well worth playing start to finish in Early Access, but I have to put it down until 1.0. That first playthrough is sublime, but enjoying what comes after in drips and drabs is not for me. Another problem is that my end-game Death Star character with a weapon that seems to have been since dummied out (or at least made much harder to acquire) was a mismatch for the more early to mid-game content added in the *Emberian Update*.

Despite the quality of the *Emberian Update*, my conclusion remains: play *Dread Delusion* in Early Access now, and then tuck it out of sight until the full release. It'll be £20 and eight or so hours well-spent, with more to come. ■

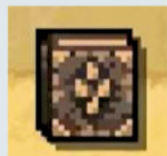
SKILLFUL MASTERY

Here are my favourite skills



CHARM

It's an immersive sim-adjacent RPG, you're gonna want to charm the pants off people for loot and better quest outcomes.



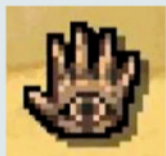
LORE

Lore might be my very favourite skill in *Dread Delusion*: it reveals hidden interactables in the environment to open up secret doors.



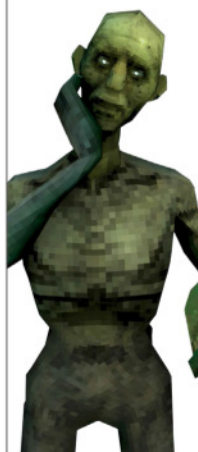
LOCKPICK

Boosting this skill lowers the difficulty of the d6 rolls you make to get past locks. A crucial pickup for robbing town residents.



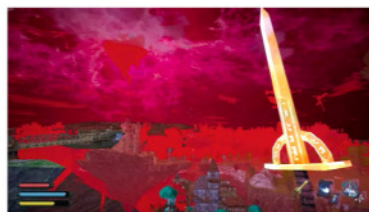
SPELLCAST

Has some combat potential, but my favourite spell is the speed boost that also negates fall damage and gives you a super jump.



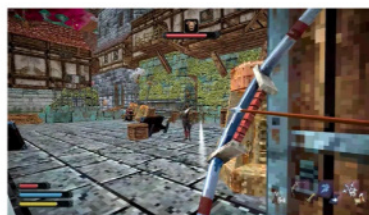


Rustberg is much more of a pure combat challenge than previous quests.



ABOVE: I trust this man to sell me a house, sure.

LEFT: *Dread Delusion's* open world is definitely a special one.



This valkyrie knows the way to notorious outlaw, Vela Callose.



SIRENROOT

Escape from ruins in Skyrim. *By Christopher Livingston*

Hey, Dragonborn! We know you love climbing mountains, exploring caves, and riding horses across the plains. But instead of blasting out dragon shouts, maybe it's time to use your lungs for something else, like holding your breath. A mod called *Sirenroot: Deluge of Deceit* adds a mysterious submerged temple at the bottom of Lake Honrich. Getting into that temple is the easy part. Getting out again is something else.

This quest begins in Riften, where I head to Elgrim's Elixirs, the town's alchemy shop. There I meet Frissa Black-Briar, who offers me a job. It sounds pretty simple: collecting a newly discovered plant from the bottom of Lake Honrich, just outside of town. This quest is recommended for Argonians, naturally, who can

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Nov 11, 2011

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

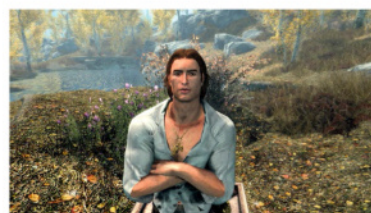
DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

LINK
nexusmods.com

breathe underwater. Unfortunately I'm a Nord, but my employer doesn't seem like they're going to discriminate against me just because I don't have gills.

DEEP DIVE

I'm sent out to the area north of the lake to meet the rest of the plant-gathering team, and as I talk to each of them it's impressed upon me again that I am definitely going to need to be good at holding my breath for extremely long periods of time. One of the freelance divers I'll be working with is named Tilael, who informs me she's a sea elf and can breathe underwater. I've never met a sea elf,



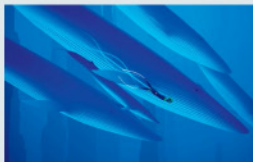
ABOVE: Every temple heist needs a crew of misfits.

LEFT: Each member of the crew is an experienced diver.



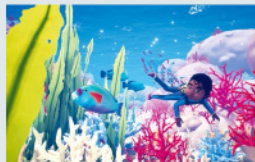
GET WET

Underwater realms



ABZÛ

No stress, no panicking, just chill vibes as you glide through the water with whales.



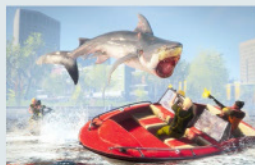
TCHIA

Running out of air? Just soul-jump into a fish and your worries are over.



SUBNAUTICA

Sure there are horrors in the depth, but it's such a great survival game I don't even mind.



MANEATER

You're a damn shark, so for once, you get to be the one eating everyone else.

and I'm not alone: the sea elf has never met another one of her kind, either. The rest of the crew are also prepared to work under the water: one by using a water-breathing spell, and another by using an amulet. Now I'm really starting to worry about drowning, but the last member of the team is an alchemist who tells me how to whip up a potion that will let me hold my breath for ages.

Once we're all ready, I dive into the lake and swim into an underwater tunnel. Thankfully, there's plenty of air in the tunnel, and after a minute of searching I manage to find the strange plant we're looking for. Unfortunately, the moment I pluck it from the rocks, everything goes black, and I awake alone in a chamber surrounded by the skeletal remains of four other humanoids. Gosh. I hope that's not my team! We only just met.

After a bit of exploring, I find myself in a large, dimly lit chamber. A bit of advice before beginning this adventure yourself: pack as many torches as you can carry or at least know some spells like Candlelight, or you're going to spend a lot of time bumbling around in the dark.

TEMPLE CLIMBER

Eventually I find myself in a large, mysterious temple. What's especially interesting about this place is that I can do more than just walk around in it: there are special areas that will actually let me do some climbing. If I see some scratches on the walls, ledges, or pillars, that means I can shimmy my way up them, which makes exploring the temple not just more fun, but more fruitful. As I'm about to discover, there are lots of locked doors and gates in the temple that require some puzzle-solving and experimentation to open, and being able to climb up and down certain parts of the temple will make that a lot easier.

After creeping around the temple for a bit, I find a big button next to a gate. Seems like an easy enough puzzle: I push the button. The gate isn't playing along with me, however, and after pushing the button a few more times it dawns on me that it probably opens something else. After some more exploring, I find an underwater passage that was blocked

earlier and is now open. I do some swimming, now grateful for that alchemist helping me make a potion, and find the button that opens that first locked gate.

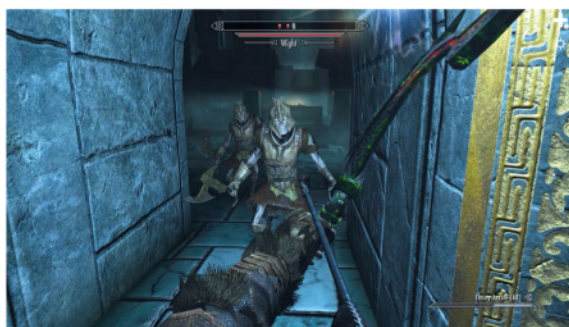
Waiting for me on the other side are a few wights, and then an even bigger and more puzzling section of the temple. Locked gates and doors are marked with coloured symbols, and the corridors leading to them are longer and more winding. It takes a while, but I eventually suss out how to open the next series of gates, and even find one of my diver buddies, the sea elf, alive but unconscious. It seems the entire team has been separated and dumped into different areas of this mysterious, puzzle-filled temple.



I AWAKE ALONE IN A CHAMBER SURROUNDED BY SKELETAL REMAINS

There are also some new elements to the next set of puzzles, like large gems that can be moved into different sockets to access new areas of the temple. At one point I'm able to completely flood a chamber with water, too, turning it from a gorge I couldn't possibly jump across into an underground lake I can easily swim. Neat! I'm not a huge fan of underwater levels – I still get cold sweats thinking about the Water Temple from *The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time* – but there's always something satisfying when you can use the water itself to solve a puzzle.

I haven't completely finished *Sirenroot* yet, though the mod's author, Everglaid, says it will take most players between two to three hours to finish. It's fully voiced by talented actors, too, and something else I appreciate about the mod is that the temple is definitely spooky as heck, with shadowy chambers, dimly lit corridors and a few monsters – but it's not a horror mod. Thankfully, it doesn't contain jump scares or any real frights. You can enjoy the puzzles in a moody atmosphere, without being absolutely terrified. ■



ABOVE: Buttons don't always do what you'd expect them to.

FAR LEFT: Getting in is easy. Getting out is the challenge.





UNCOVER SECRETS IN

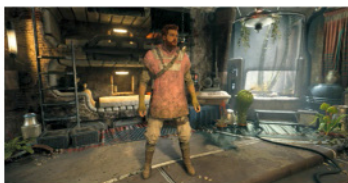
STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

Easter eggs and hidden items. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
NormalTIME
15 hours

VITAL LINKS

Health Stim locations:
bit.ly/42Q00KxPriorite Shard locations:
bit.ly/3o19XCpOutfit locations:
bit.ly/41wCZHO

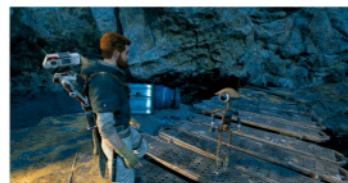
PONCHO UP

1 Those who played *Fallen Order* might remember the many-eyed toad boss, Oggdo Bogdo, but in *Jedi Survivor* you can fight its offspring. In Fort Kah'lin you'll find the Spawn of Oggdo Bogdo boss, and if you beat it, you can earn Cal's iconic pink poncho.



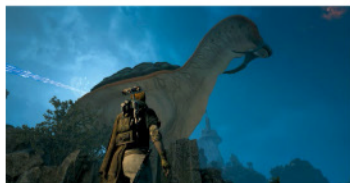
RANCOROUS

2 The Rancor in Sodden Grotto is a tough boss, especially if you fight it at the very start of the game, but did you know it has one very thematic weakness? If you Force Grab a bone you can jam it in the creature's mouth just like Luke does in *Return of the Jedi*.



PIT DROID

3 You may recall this poor Pit Droid from the Gorge Crash Site when you arrive on Koboh. Once you acquire the Force Lift ability in the Lucrehulk, you can rescue its ship, and it'll repay you by tending to the Mantis whenever you're in port.



TRONTOSHELL

4 Remember that giant friendly creature you came across when you first arrived on Koboh? If you return to it and use the Major Fauna Confusion ability you get in the Basalt Forest, you can hop onto its tusks and access a secret area with the Hunter Lightsaber.



BIG BIRD

5 Another creature you can befriend with the Major Fauna Confusion ability. After you free this big bird in the Forest Array and unlock balloon traversal, you can tame it in the Boiling Bluff in order to fly to a new in-game area.



LIFE DRAWING

6 One of the strangest secrets in *Jedi Survivor* are the battle droids drawing a Mogu. Head to the cave in Harvest Ridge with the Bilemaw inside, then climb to the upper level, and look for a crack in the wall beside a white glowing lantern.



SANTARI KHRI

7 For fans of ornate lightsabers, you can find the High Republic Santari Khri saber. In the Untamed Downs you'll discover a cave next to a watery slope with a destructible barrier inside – lure a roller mine from the nearby hangar to destroy it and get to the chest.

PYLOON'S SALOON *Did you spot these Easter eggs?*



1

CLONE HELMET

There are many references to the Clone Wars in *Jedi Survivor*. If you look up into the rafters of Pyloon's Saloon you can spot a stray Clone Trooper helmet.

2

JABBA'S BARGE

If you look close enough, you'll recognise a model of Jabba the Hutt's big sand barge from *Return of the Jedi*.

3

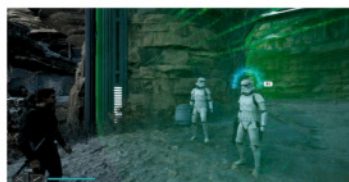
AUROMAE ISELO

While it may not be the famed bounty hunter from Enfys Nest who first appeared in the *Solo* film, this alien is definitely a rare Melbu.



NEW THREADS

8 Besides the Hermit and Scoundrel outfits you get from different editions of the game, based on Obi Wan and Han Solo respectively, you can grab Luke's training shirt from Doma's Shop, and get your own Jedi Robes from a chest near the Crypt of Uhrma on Jedha.



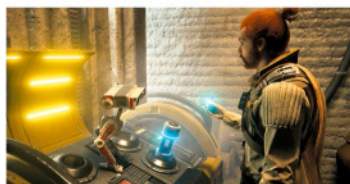
SLICE AND EASY

9 *Jedi Survivor* has all sorts of deadly droids that can be a pain to fight, but did you know you can hack and turn them into allies? The first BD-1 slice for Imperial Security Droids is found in Prospector's Folly where you mind trick some Stormtroopers to open a barrier.



BOBA FETT

10 While exploring the Devastated Settlement on Koboh you'll unlock bounty hunts with Korej Lim, but if you complete all 17 you get to encounter a familiar face... or helmet, I guess? Boba Fett in the flesh, even voiced by Temuera Morrison.



MYSTERY KEY

11 After you unlock Doma's Shop in Rambler's Reach, you can purchase a mysterious keycode from her for ten priorite shards. This opens the locked door next to the counter, behind which you can snag a Health Stim. It's wise to grab this upgrade as early as you can.



CRYPTIC

12 When you return to Jedha and find yourself travelling up the Pilgrim's Path with Merrin, you might happen upon the mysterious Crypt of Uhrma and its puzzle. Force Pull the bolts out in the order shown to get yourself an extra Health Stim.



TAKING ON THE CHOSEN IN XCOM 2

PART II

The battle against the alien DLC steps up a notch. *By Ian Evenden*

As a new entry for the diary dawns, I'm feeling pretty good about my position. I've unlocked the fifth member of my squad through the Guerrilla Tactics School, and my troops now have magnetic and gauss weapons. Nothing can stop me. The game, too, seems to be adapting to my preferences, as new soldiers are appearing already wearing jorts.

A rescue mission comes up, netting me an engineer. I'm in the middle of ambushing a bunch of Advent led by a Viper when Nightwitch, the Chosen Assassin, decides the moment is ripe to teleport in and cause me some problems. The final Covert Action that will allow me to assault her fortress only becomes active when one of my troops is promoted to major, meaning I'll have to go through a lot of missions before I can finally put a stop to her incessant radio messages.

The Assassin always sounds much worse than she actually is, and she's not that much of an issue this time, dazing three of my troops but taking cover right below a window where stealthy sniper Elena Dragunova is crouched unseen. It's a 100% hit and the assassin is weak to Reapers, so she takes heavy damage yet doesn't move, allowing me to bring my Grenadier round for a 69% flanking shot, which forces her to teleport back to her base. Flanking shots and forcing a Chosen to retreat gain us extra Ability points, which can be spent on new skills. In the same mission my Specialist's magnetic rifle hits a Sectoid so hard it goes through a wall, and my Sharpshooter holds her rifle like a pistol in a weird glitch.

COMBAT LOSSES

One mission later, and I suffer my first death. Her name was Mary, and she was a Grenadier. She was disorientated by a Sectoid psychic attack, then hit by a Mec's explosive mortars as we raced to steal some Advent data before the box it was in exploded. She was only a squaddie, with two missions under her belt, but we take the loss hard.

Another comes soon after, a Ranger sergeant taken from a rooftop by a Muton's plasma beam. And, on the mission to rescue Mox, who was kidnapped by the Assassin in part one, another Grenadier goes down. I gain

Mox back, however, and thanks to making contact with the Templars I have my first psychic operative, one Sgt Mulder, whose codename is disappointingly not Fox. Though perhaps after I click the Edit button it will be.

The next mission sees the arrival of Spectres, a unit introduced in *WOTC*. They are a shock. I've never encountered them before, even their very existence had somehow passed me by, so watching one dissolve, race across the map, then create a doppelgänger of one of my Sharpshooters to fight against me was an interesting moment. Like the swarms in Michael Crichton's *Prey*, they consist of a cloud of nanobots, this time forced into

FORCING A CHOSEN TO RETREAT GAINS US EXTRA ABILITY POINTS

enough of a human shape to hold a plasma rifle. Your first overwatch shot passes straight through them, and they've got a psychic attack that heals them at the expense of the mental health of their target.

In short, Spectres are bastards, and they arrived just as I was beginning to move over to magnetic weapons, which at least meant I had a bit more firepower to bring down their health bar. And as I discovered later on, you can't take control of them with your psychic troops. Being made of nanobots, they presumably have a distributed consciousness like a swarm of bees, and doing a Granny Weatherwax and borrowing one for a while just doesn't work.

ROYAL PROGRESS

We take out an Advent blacksite next, planting explosives to blow it sky high and encountering another part of *XCOM 2*'s DLC, the Viper King. He's part of the *Alien Hunters* pack, and gets his own phase of combat where he carries out an action after every move I make on my turn. This means he's flinging his tongue at us like a loved-up Yoshi, trying to bind my troops, spitting his freezing venom, and generally being deeply annoying.

It's also a big problem when he manages to bind a soldier. Binding does damage to the bound trooper, but I can shoot the King to get him to unwind. At which point he uses his Ruler Reaction move to bind again, which does damage, until I shoot him again to get him off. And round and round we go until the poor Ranger he'd targeted was close to death. Luckily he was wearing a nanoscale vest, the best armour I've got at the moment as developing plated armour needs six Advent Trooper corpses, but I sold all mine at the Black Market and they're no longer appearing on missions.

Irritatingly the King doesn't even hang around long enough to die properly, opening an escape portal following one too many hits from my Specialist's very special talon

THE RULES

1. Use all DLC.
2. No save-scumming.
3. As many jorts-clad soldiers as possible.



The WAR suit completely forgets about armouring your soldier's arms.

» rounds, a nasty invention from the Proving Ground which do extra damage.

HUNTER GATHERER

The next mission sees an incursion by Banestalker the Hunter, as I've activated him on the strategic map by making contact with the resistance in the sector of the planet this second Chosen patrols. The Hunter is a long-range specialist, and it's a much more exhilarating fight than any against the Assassin. He uses tranquilliser darts and grenades to harry XCOM, who are just innocently trying to hack a computer terminal, and seems to have a grudge against my lone remaining Grenadier, as he sets up his two-turn sniper shot on him twice. Luckily, the Grenadier can dodge between cover to shake it off, allowing my Sharpshooter to take up her own position and force the Chosen to teleport out.

That Sharpshooter, who's now going by the name Bullseye, has a very good mission, as an Advent officer comes and stands very conveniently near her, allowing her to take advantage of the Shadowkeeper pistol from the *Alien Hunters* DLC which grants +10 aim and +15 crit chance. She fires it once as a normal action, then again using her Lightning Hands skill, killing the officer and ending the mission.

All these officers, Kings and Chosen make me reflect on the top-heavy nature of the Advent forces, and their lack of a clear hierarchy like the Covenant in *Halo*, another assemblage of warlike species. Just who is senior to whom here? The Advent officers would appear to be in charge of the basic troops, hence all the pointing, but can you imagine one bossing around a Muton? The Elders are definitely at the top of the chain, but never seen on the battlefield (for now), and are there different ranks of Sectoids and Andromedans? Archons seem to be pod leaders for weaker species, but where do the robots fit into all this, is even a lowly Sectoid going to want a bot as a squad leader?

Speaking of Archons, they make their first appearance on a mission to intercept Advent intel, but the flying Adonis and his Muton bodyguard die instantly when Dragunova detonates explosives she'd planted earlier thanks to her Remote Start ability. The Lost are

BELOW: Archons' facial expressions are very disdainful.



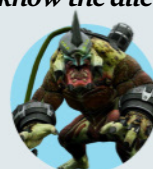
ROYAL RUMBLE

Get to know the alien rulers



VIPER KING

Essentially a more powerful Viper, Subject Gamma has a freezing breath attack instead of poison, and carries an armour-piercing weapon. You can wear her skin as armour.



BERSEKER QUEEN

Subject Beta, a Berserker with extra equipment, can scream at your soldiers, with a chance to panic them, and has a ground-pound AOE attack.



ARCHON KING

Airborne Subject Alpha can whisk one of your soldiers up into the air, dropping them on his Ruler Reaction phase for massive damage. He also has a variant of the Blazing Pinions AOE attack.

present on this mission, but we battle through and take down more Mutons and Advent Shieldbearers. Dragunova makes it to major, so I can activate the Covert Action to find the Assassin's lair.

Another Retaliation mission drops, notable only because the aliens choose to send Andromedans, Berserkers, Spectres and Chryssalids, plus two Faceless who reveal themselves then manage to miss with their melee attacks. By now I've unlocked all six squad slots and built a Spark, a robotic unit with a railgun and an armoured body that, in its upgraded state, can provide cover for my troops. The Assassin decides to get involved in this one too, which is a concern as she's now immune to melee damage, but she is gunned down by a Grenadier and Sharpshooter who flank her after she dazes Mox. After some hot mech-on-mech action the Spark goes down, sacrificing its artificial life to protect my squishier soldiers from an Advent officer and his Shieldbearer chum. I also get a chance to try out the Skulljack on an officer, which triggers the Codex enemy, who's suddenly everywhere. Three spawn in the next mission, which becomes six as they clone themselves if they take enough damage.

RETALIATION

All this time, the Assassin has been gathering intelligence on XCOM, and chooses this moment to launch a mission of her own, bringing an enormous cannon and a massive alien strike force to hit back at the Avenger. This mission takes place on the ground outside the Avenger itself.

It's a chance to deploy the quad turrets of my Defense Matrix, which give me two shots or overwatch each on my turn, and also field two full squads of troopers. The problem here is that I've not been keeping my supply of Rookies up, and many of my troops are tired or wounded. I put up as good a defence as I can, heading out in shiny new powered



MY WAR-SUITED GRENADEER HAS BLUESCREEN ROUNDS IN HER CANNON

armour and led by a Grenadier in a WAR suit that's got a hint of Warhammer 40K. All this new armour does rather destroy the aesthetic of my jorts-wearing squads, however.

We spread out, my Rangers heading toward the big gun's power generator to introduce it to some Shard Gun shells, and between the soldiers and turrets we manage to take down a Berserker, Mecs, some Chryssalids, Archons, Advent troops and Sectoids. We're making good progress, when a pair of Sectopods appear. We've seen these hulking robots before, but always on their own, and

though I have enough troops to surround them it's not going to be easy getting through their armour.

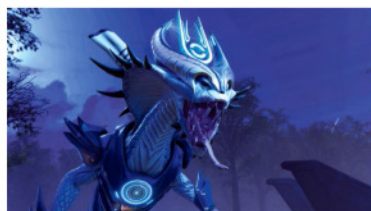
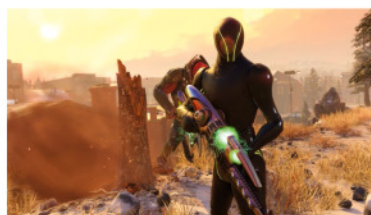
Still, I have an ace up my sleeve. My WAR-suited Grenadier has Bluescreen rounds in her cannon, which deal +5 damage against robotic enemies, making them easier to hack too. She's already used them to great effect against Advent MECs, and now she opens up at a Sectopod before a Specialist uses Haywire Protocol to shut it down for two turns. It's a shooting gallery after that, and it's fitting that the massive mech eventually explodes after a shot from the Grenadier.

The second Sectopod has been softened up by a Sharpshooter I left covering the approach to the Avenger ramp, but tries to use its Wrath Cannon, a lethal attack that has to be set up the turn before, giving my troops time to escape. And as Mox is its target, the bot doesn't get to actually fire. He's highly mobile and has a

Whiplash ability that damages robots and doesn't cost an action, so he's able to run in, hit it with Whiplash, then fire his bullpup to bring the metal giant down.

It's the turrets that finish the mission, blowing up the aliens' big gun and forcing Nightwitch to retreat (she stands just a bit too close, and with eight shots at my disposal the 48% hit percentage means she was gone within the turn). No alien even got close to the Avenger's ramp. When I get back to Command it doesn't take long for the mission to assault the Assassin's stronghold to appear via a Covert Action. Next time, we're fighting back. ■

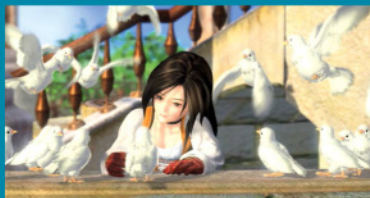
ABOVE: The Assassin is going down hard.





FINAL FANTASY IX'S BRILLIANT BITE-SIZED VIGNETTES

ATEs are the play within the play. *By Wes Fenlon*



LEFT: Feed the birds, tuppence a bag, tuppence, tuppence, tuppence a bag.

RIGHT: I got to be honest with you, that boat does not look seaworthy.



Maybe *Final Fantasy IX* is my favourite game of all time because of my early exposure to – say this along with me in your most pretentiously flowery accent – the theatre.

Hoping their kid wouldn't be the type to sit inside doing nothing but playing videogames, my parents often took me to our local theatre, where I saw professional actors perform everything from Shakespeare to Mamet long before I'd even heard of a Japanese RPG. By the time a friend loaned me his PlayStation and insisted I play *Final Fantasy IX*, I must've been psychically primed to love a game that begins with a crew of actor-thieves putting on a play called *I Want To Be Your Canary* before kidnapping the princess-in-distress and setting off on a world-spanning adventure.

Or maybe it was everything else that grabbed me: the whimsical music, the clever dialogue and slapstick comedy, the romance at the heart of it all. But the thing I most loved about *Final Fantasy IX* then, and still do 20 years later, is that even when your characters drop the act and flee the stage in the opening minutes, the play never really ends.

HIT YOUR MARKS

For the next 40 hours or so, *Final Fantasy IX* sprinkles in these little moments called Active Time Events as you're going on your journey. Each is a short cutscene, usually under a minute, that whisks your god's eye view of the world away from the character you're controlling to some other player in the story.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
April 14, 2016

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Squaresoft

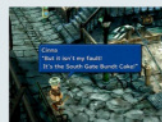
LINK
square-enix-games.com

ATE-'EM-UP

A sampling of small, succulent scenes



TEACH ME, MOGSTER!
FFIX's cute tutorial is actually a pair of Moogles (who you'll later meet) chatting.



CRIME AND PUNISHMENT
Half-naked chef Cinna wakes up on a bench after a bundt cake bender.



NUPTIAL JOY
A joke leads to popular FFX characters Quina and Vivi getting married.

It was so very Squaresoft to slap a fancy name on the concept of 'short cutscenes', but Active Time Events worked so well that it's baffling to me that they didn't become as ubiquitous in later games as the Active Time Battle system had across the first decade of *Final Fantasy*s. These quick scenes cleverly bypass the problem that so many other JRPGs struggle with, where your whole party is either stuck together for every conversation or off idling in town somewhere without much to say.

A COUPLE OF RANDOM KIDS PLOT THE DOWNFALL OF THE NOBLE CLASS



So much of the personality in *FFIX*'s cast comes from these scenes. There's bumbling Steiner, whose self-seriousness always ends up making him the butt of a joke. Early on, innocent young black mage Vivi has the sobering realisation that he doesn't have long to live, and he grapples with that, while seeing the world for the first time, throughout the game. ATEs also give minor characters a chance to feel like part of the story's greater fabric and living citizens of its fantasy world.

CURTAIN CALL

If these vignettes weren't explicitly meant to mirror Shakespeare's fools or the chorus of Greek comedies, Squaresoft sure stumbled into a perfect allusion. Shakespeare would occasionally break from the main cast of his dramas to give two commoners, like the gravediggers in *Hamlet*, a few minutes to pointedly comment on the themes of the play and the absurdity of their royal betters. In one ATE, a couple of random kids plot the downfall of the noble class while one of your party members wanders by. In a string of ATEs running throughout the game, your strangest party member Quina tries to eat everything in sight, including the moon's reflection.

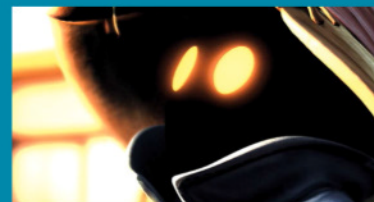
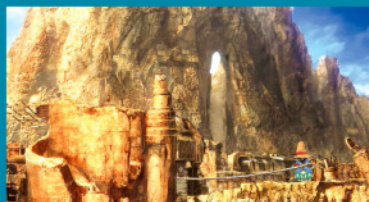
Some of the more touching ATEs remind me of the way so many plays handle monologues, with a spotlight beaming down on the speaker while everyone else stands still in the darkness. There's a simple one I remember vividly from the first couple hours: Ruby, a member of your acting/thieving crew, appears sitting on the floor of an empty tavern, and she's been left behind and forgotten in the call to adventure. "Where'd everybuddy go?" she asks. When you return to the city of Alexandria hours later, you'll find Ruby has started up her own small theatre rather than disappearing from the story.

In *Final Fantasy IX*'s final scene, the whole troupe reunites for another performance of *I Want To Be Your Canary*, this time without a kidnapping interrupting the show. Ruby gets her moment as the play's tragic Juliet. Fundamentally theatre just wants to make you care about the characters, and Ruby embodies that: she has maybe a dozen lines in a 40-hour game, but that single ATE turns out all the lights except hers, setting aside the grand stakes to give a bit player a few seconds alone with the audience. It's all we need. ■



LEFT: If you like moogles then you're in for a treat in *FFIX*.

RIGHT: Vivi has really strong hat game.





JEDI KNIGHT 2: JEDI OUTCAST

Revisiting Raven's classic FPS in the age of Jedi: Survivor. *By Rick Lane*

Has *Jedi Outcast* finally had its day? For over 20 years, Raven Software's sequel to 1997's *Jedi Knight* has (with its sister game *Jedi Academy*) been the gold standard for Jedi-based action. Its masterful portrayal of Force powers and lightsaber combat has never been bettered, not even by mega-budget Star Wars games like *The Force Unleashed* or *Jedi: Fallen Order*.

Yet the sequel to *Fallen Order*, *Jedi: Survivor*, had me doubting. Respawn's follow up is not only a spellbinding action-adventure, but also a far better Jedi simulator than *Fallen Order* was. It has more force powers, a wider range of lightsaber stances, enemies that are more fun to fight, and crucially, a blade that cuts through Stormtroopers rather than

simply clobbering them. It's the first Jedi game since *Outcast* and *Academy* that feels worthy to join the council, possibly even lead it.

The only way to ascertain the truth was to play *Jedi Outcast* again, which doesn't take much convincing, but it's nice to have an excuse. And having spent a few evenings carving my way through the Star Wars universe, the answer intrigues me. *Jedi: Survivor* is a better game than *Jedi Outcast*. But only in some areas.

One such area is the introduction. *Jedi Survivor* kicks off with a daring heist on Coruscant that lets you wield most of the toys you unlocked in the previous game from the start. *Outcast*, by comparison, has you play the first five levels of the game without any Jedi powers at all. After falling to the dark side in *Jedi Knight* before being rehabilitated by Mara Jade in the game's *Mysteries of the*

Sith expansion, wisecracking spacebeard Kyle Katarn cuts himself off from the force. Katarn then returns to his mercenary ways, relying only on a blaster and his friend and pilot Jan Ors. *Outcast* kicks off with Kyle and Jan exploring an Imperial Remnant outpost for Mon Mothma, where they discover the imps have been conducting experiments with crystals. And no, not like your new-age aunt does.

PATIENCE YOUNG PADAWAN

Jedi Outcast's introduction isn't terrible. It serves a necessary purpose, and the game is a capable

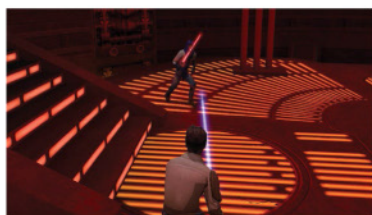
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2002

DEVELOPER
Raven Software

PUBLISHER
LucasArts

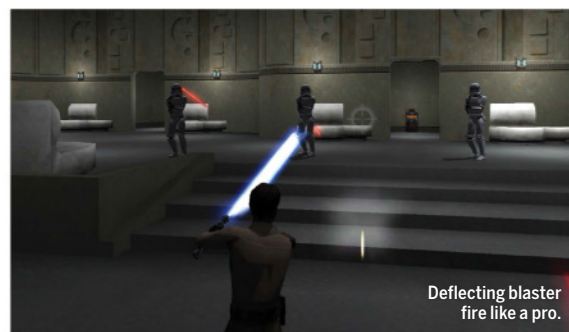
LINK
bit.ly/2LGXn6Y



TOP RIGHT: The fight alongside Luke is immense.

ABOVE: An iconic moment in *Star Wars* gaming.

RIGHT: The best cheat in gaming? Yes.



Deflecting blaster fire like a pro.

shooter (it is built in the *Quake 3* engine, after all.) But it's overlong and, given how dominant the lightsaber becomes in its second half, too stingy with its weapon roster. Blasting Stormtroopers in Kejim Outpost is entertaining enough, but having your ankles nipped at by tiny aliens in Arcturus Mines is a total bust. The nadir is a sequence where you escort an Imperial officer up a flight of stairs in the detention centre,

which takes aeons as he moves at the speed of a Hutt after a big dinner.

Flawed as it is, though, the intro isn't the part of the game which has aged the most. As Kyle and Jan prepare to leave Arcturus, purple Sith dinosaur Desann turns up and tosses Kyle around like a bouncy ball, starting him down the path of reconnecting with the force. After stopping off at the Valley of the Jedi to get his powers back, then visiting

THE MOMENT THE REBORN ARRIVE ON THE SCENE, JEDI OUTCAST LIGHTS UP

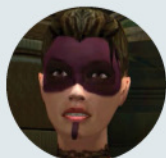
Luke's Jedi temple on Yavin IV to retrieve his lightsaber, Kyle heads to Coruscant's evil twin Nar Shaddaa, hot on the trail of a Rodian named Reelo Baruk who Kyle believes can lead him to Desann.

When I first played *Jedi Outcast*, I loved Nar Shaddaa. Its twisting, vertiginous environment seemed astonishing at the time, and its playful brand of sci-fi seediness is eternally appealing. The initial sequence in the bar is great too. That your first lightsaber fight involves slicing up a bar full of gangsters is a fun callback to *A New Hope*, and I love Kyle's bizarre line, "Never trust a bartender with bad grammar."

But the rest of this section has lost much of its appeal. The complex environment means you constantly have to stop and look around to navigate. This is fine in isolation, but stopping means being murked instantly by Rodian snipers armed with disruptor rifles, or blown to Bogano by three-eyed Grans who can

THE DARK SIDE IS IN OUR BLOOD

Kyle Katarn's foes are many in Jedi Outcast, including...



TAVION AXMIS

A human female Dark Jedi apprenticed under Desann. Tavion aids Desann in attempting to take over the galaxy for the Empire Reborn. She is a skilled lightsaber duelist in one-on-one combat.



REELO BARUK

Nar Shaddaa's most feared and powerful criminal kingpin, Baruk fronts his evil doings behind a local garbage-hauling company. His thugs are considered some of the worst scum in the galaxy.



GALAK FYYAR

Galak, along with Dark Jedi Desann, heads up the Empire Reborn's movement to artificially create an army of Force-sensitive super soldiers by infusing them with artusian crystals.

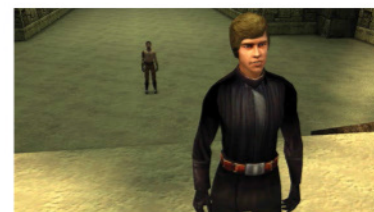


DESANN

Jedi Outcast's big bad, Desann is a Chisori male Dark Jedi. Desann makes an alliance with Galak Fyyar in order take over the galaxy with an army of warriors infused with dark force powers.



Kyle straddles the line between light and dark, but in a way that's less edgy than other *Star Wars* games.



FAR LEFT: Blinky Dee Williams.

ABOVE: Luke, soap opera look away to camera addict.



» toss thermal detonators like a tennis-ball machine. Kyle's movement also has a slight slipperiness to it which makes platforming incredibly precarious. The game isn't difficult, per se. But it throws a lot of traps your way, which makes progress through this section more about trial and error than actual skill.

Moreover, fighting enemies without lightsabers is one area *Jedi: Survivor* has *Outcast* beat. Your Force powers and ability to parry blaster bolts are both much more effective and much more fun to use in *Survivor*, particularly Cal's penchant for pulling Stormtroopers onto the point of his saber. In *Outcast*, you spend a lot of time chasing enemies around, flailing at them with your blade. It's fun, but feels less refined.

All that changes when you meet Lando Calrissian (voiced with mixed enthusiasm by Billy Dee Williams) and escape in his luxury space yacht to Bespin. Despite being literally in the sky, Cloud City has far less in the way of deadly drops, while the cheap-kill gangsters gradually give way to more dependably dangerous Stormtroopers. Best of all, Bespin is where *Outcast* introduces the Reborn, the Sith warriors artificially infused with the Force by Desann.

A LIGHTSABER MASTER

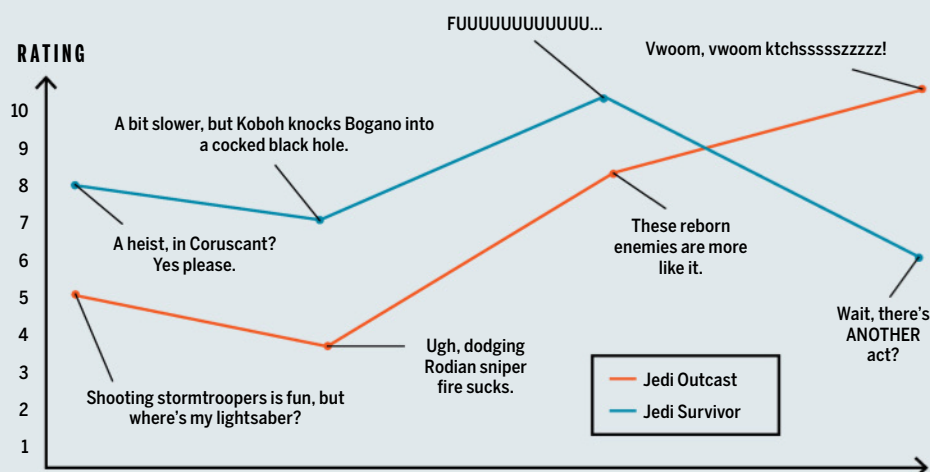
The moment the Reborn arrive on the scene, *Jedi Outcast* lights up. Their introduction is superbly handled too. There's no great fanfare, no hint at what awaits you at the top of one of Cloud City's colossal ventilation tubes. You get to the top,

there's a quick cutscene, and suddenly you're trading blows with a hooded fellow wielding a red lightsaber. You're every bit as surprised as Kyle is.

From here on out, *Jedi Outcast* is a stone-cold masterpiece. The way it elaborates on this initial fight is

JEDI SURVIVOR VERSUS OUTCAST

Here's how the two games fare across their respective campaigns





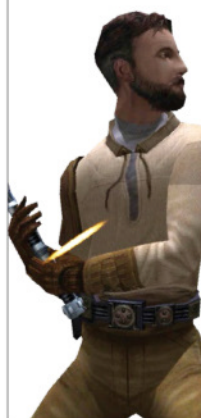
masterful. The next encounter takes place a few rooms later, inside a carbonite chamber you've been searching for. In other words, *Jedi Outcast* lets you play out Luke's iconic duel with Vader at the climax of *Empire* in the second lightsaber fight of the game. From here, the fights become more intense. While dangerous, the Reborn are clearly no match for a real Jedi, so they start to ambush you from the shadows or attack you in groups. Eventually, they start wearing lightsaber-resistant armour, making them much more durable and able to stay in the fight longer.

And yes, the lightsaber combat itself is still fantastic, and is where Raven has the edge over Respawn. *Jedi: Survivor* does some things better, particularly parrying enemy lightsaber attacks. But ultimately, Respawn's system is still couched in canned animations and stylish finishing moves, lacking the free-flowing dynamism of *Jedi Outcast*. The fact that lightsaber damage is decoupled from whether you're swinging it or not means enemies can be killed at any moment during a fight, whether you deliberately slice their arm off, or if they catch their foot on your blade as they try to leap

DUELS PLAY OUT DIFFERENTLY EVERY TIME, MAKING THEM ENDLESSLY REPLAYABLE

over you. Consequently, duels play out differently every time, making them endlessly replayable, and endlessly compelling.

Compare that to the lightsaber duels in *Jedi: Survivor*, and while there is definitely fun to be had in them, and thanks to different combat stances there is some replayability on offer as you test out how each works against specific enemies, the fact that you're still locked in to those canned animations means there is still a formulaic feel to duelling. *Jedi: Survivor* never really shakes off its *Dark Souls* combat mechanics, and that means there's a level of baked-in rigidity that *Jedi Outcast* doesn't have. This doesn't always play in the older game's favour, as there are times when you'll be defeated in lightsaber combat seemingly unfairly, with the more organic movement of the blade leading to unpredictable, frustrating failures. But, overall, it adds incredible dynamism and spice to each battle.



One other area where *Outcast* holds its own against *Jedi: Survivor* is storytelling. *Survivor*'s story is grander, better performed, and plays with more interesting ideas. But *Outcast* has the more coherent plot and a stronger main character. Like Crystal Dynamics' version of Lara Croft, Cal Kestis is defined more by external trauma than any core personality traits, whereas Kyle has a clear worldview and a coherent internal life. He also isn't a good person by default. He's cynical, spiteful and quite happy to lower himself to the level of his enemies. He's already fallen to the dark side once, which means he must work at being a Jedi, and hold himself to a higher standard. This makes him feel a much more adult, layered, complex protagonist than *Jedi: Survivor*'s Cal, who emotionally remains skin deep and more simple as a character.

Has *Jedi Outcast* finally had its day? Absolutely not. Instead, it's an older, wiser companion to *Jedi: Survivor*'s youthful exuberance. The master to the apprentice. Its flaws may be more visible with age, and it takes longer than ever to get to the good stuff. But when *Jedi Outcast* draws its lightsaber, it can still duel with the best of them. ■

TYLER COLP



I wear clown skins in *Overwatch* and have threatened to mod 2B into *Sekiro*. My brain is like *Everything Everywhere all at Once*. I want to be overwhelmed and astonished.

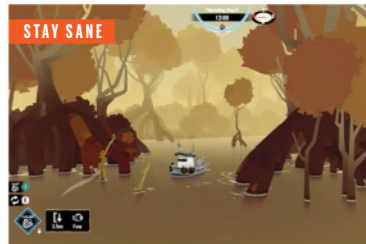


SOLVE A MURDER

THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL

thegoldenidol.com

→ Don't skip *The Case of the Golden Idol*, our pick for the best story of 2022. The detective mystery just got its first set of DLC scenarios in *The Spider of Lanka*. You travel back a year before the base game to see the origins of its decades-long murder mystery.

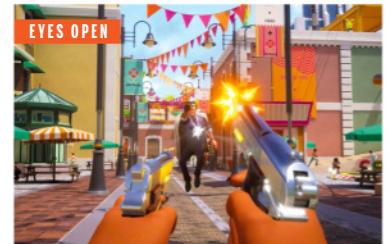


STAY SANE

DREDGE

blacksaltgames.com

→ What if you had a chill fishing game but it was a little weird? *Dredge* takes an ocean and dumps buckets of writhing horrors in it. You cast your line and hope the deep rumbles below your dinky boat won't follow you home. Just don't go out when it's dark.



EYES OPEN

DECEIVE INC

deceiveinc.com

→ *Deceive Inc* is an extraction shooter about misdirection. Stay quiet and use gadgets to catch enemy players or blow your cover and adapt. Tactical play can squeeze out a victory if you're careful. Few shooters transition between two modes as effortlessly as this.



SHRED MORE

HI-FI RUSH

beth.games/3NG0cDV

→ *Hi-Fi Rush* is what happens when you put a character action game and a rhythm game into a blender. Your attacks all fit to the beat of a big list of rock songs. With its cast of bright characters and goofy sense of humour, it's perfect for a weekend romp.

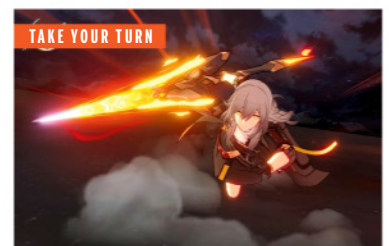
MUST



PLAY

**A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW**

by Tyler Colp



TAKE YOUR TURN

HONKAI: STAR RAIL

hsr.hoyoverse.com

→ From the developer of *Genshin Impact* comes *Honkai: Star Rail*, a turn-based RPG. You and a team of anime protagonists ride on a space train and fight evil robots with your set of visually striking abilities. One character can issue an orbital strike and sip coffee while it explodes.

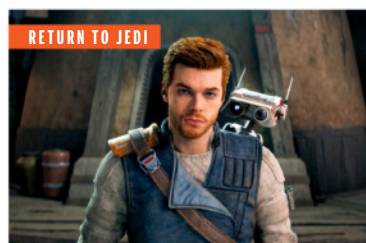


HEY STRANGER

RESIDENT EVIL 4 REMAKE

bit.ly/3NLSbT3

→ *Resident Evil 4*, besides being a phenomenal horror adventure, is extremely strange. You're a young cop on a mission to save the president's daughter and you buy your weapons from a merchant with a peculiar laugh. The remake only amplifies the most esoteric bits.



RETURN TO JEDI

STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

bit.ly/3pfkhXx

→ Cal Kestis has a face and a lightsaber and his newest outing has opportunities to customise both. Don a mullet and give your lightsaber a battle-damaged hilt. Wear a mohawk to a cantina and keep your golden blaster hidden. The fashion is endless in the galaxy far, far away.



PARRY THIS

WO LONG: FALLEN DYNASTY

bit.ly/3pecfXx

→ As we wait for *Elden Ring*'s DLC, play a very different action RPG set during the Warring States period. *Wo Long* is a dark fantasy tale where a mastery of your weapons, combos and abilities is essential. Its demonic monsters bite back, but clever tactics can eke out a victory.



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IT'S ALL OVER...

OUR GUIDE TO SURVIVING THE APOCALYPSE

Welcome to PC Gamer's tourist guide to surviving the post-nuclear apocalypse world



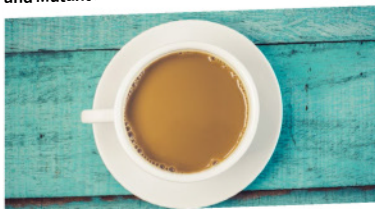
Britain

TOURIST GUIDE
Robert Jones



WHAT TO READ

PC Gamer magazine, Pride and Prejudice and Mutants.



WHAT TO EAT/DRINK

Irradiated cups of Earl Grey tea, glowing pints of London Pride ale, hedgehog pies.



HOW TO MAKE MONEY

Butlering for the ruling Ghoul Family, sweeping the chimneys of rich mutants.

WHAT SPORTS TO PLAY

Cricket for the local First XI against Zombie CC, rugby using human skulls.

WHAT BREAKS TO TAKE

Bank holidays, where British subjects are forced to cower in the crumbling remains of old banks, hiding from giant mutated badgers.



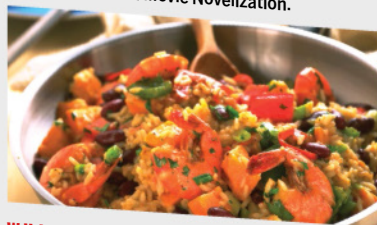
USA

TOURIST GUIDE
Wes Fenlon



WHAT TO READ

PC Gamer magazine, Dawn of the Planet of the Apes: The Official Movie Novelization.



WHAT TO EAT/DRINK

Freedom (from a functioning society) fries, super jumbo prawn gumbo, 128 oz Coca-Cola.



HOW TO MAKE MONEY

Convincing the masses to invest in your new altcoin, ApocBux.

WHAT SPORTS TO PLAY

Soccer (LTPP).

WHAT BREAKS TO TAKE

George Washington Resurrection Day, Kick a Confederate into the Grand Canyon Day.



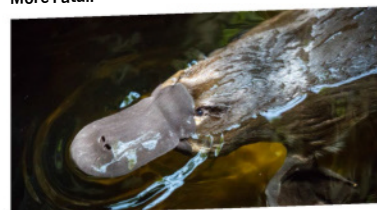
Australia

TOURIST GUIDE
Jody Macgregor



WHAT TO READ

PC Gamer magazine, The Fatal Shore 2: Even More Fatal.



WHAT TO EAT/DRINK

Mutant platypus sausages, mutant Vegemite spread thinly on mutant toast, beer.



HOW TO MAKE MONEY

Travelling from town to town selling antivenom to protect against all the radspiders, radsnakes and radkangaroos.

WHAT SPORTS TO PLAY

The same ones as the British, only better.

WHAT BREAKS TO TAKE

ANZAC Day 2, celebrating when the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps reunited to fight together in the second Great Emu War (we lost).



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